



CAT UNDER COVER

LEA TASSIE

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(Adriana Island Cats - Book Three)

by

Lea Tassie

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For The House of Flying Fur
and all who dwell therein:
Mayne, Kaza, Doran

Animals have these advantages over man: they never hear the clock strike, they die without any idea of death, they have no theologians to instruct them, their last moments are not disturbed by unwelcome and unpleasant ceremonies, their funerals cost them nothing, and no one starts lawsuits over their wills. (Voltaire, 1694-1778)

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I -- A Slug in the Garden

Spring came early to Adriana Island and Holly Haven. March flourished purple and white crocuses, golden daffodils and satiny tulips in neon reds and yellows. It was now the middle of April, which was showing off with forget-me-nots and fresh pink blooms on camellias and Japanese cherry trees. Ben had almost finished getting the garden ready for the greenhouse seedlings he'd tended through the West Coast's usual wet and windy winter and was chirping about the new vegetable varieties he intended to plant.

I'd have been content to sit on the front veranda and gaze at the ocean or watch blooming apple trees in the orchard while birds defended their territories with song, but in November I'd been elected as a trustee for Adriana. Since then, I'd learned that creating an official community plan took a lot of time and gave back equal amounts of frustration. And, because I was still writing *Tidelines*, the business gossip column in the *Adriana Advocate*, being Mom to a Samoyed dog and six cats with demanding Siamese voices, my plan to write more short stories was on a burner so far back I couldn't even see it.

I'd just finished putting breakfast dishes in the sink and was looking out the window at the end of the driveway, where three cats sniffed at the cedar shrub that served as their message tree, when the phone rang. I hoped it wasn't Duff, one of the other trustees. We were forever getting complaints about our zoning proposals from some landowner who didn't want his land zoned because he might want to do something different with it some day. Ben and I would be happy raising asparagus and cats forever, but we didn't want to risk having a slaughterhouse next door.

"Holly, dear, are you busy this morning? I need to talk to you."

My mother-in-law sounded stressed. That worried me; she was usually so calm. "Should I come over?"

"No, I'll come to you. I don't want to have this discussion in front of Norma."

Maggie had been sharing Norma's house for a year and they were getting along fine. Still, Maggie was eighty-one and Norma in her late seventies. I wondered if it was becoming too much for them to take care of a big house, a big garden, and Norma's animals.

"By the time you get here, I'll have the morning coffee brewed. If you're lucky, Cal might show up, too." Maggie and Cal Peterson, our next-door neighbor, had lived together for a while, scandalizing Ben, but now they were back to just dating.

"He had to go to Victoria today," Maggie said. Cal was the island's Mr. Fix-it, probably buying building materials he couldn't get on Adriana.

Twenty minutes later I heard tires crunching on gravel and went to greet Maggie at the back door. In spite of seeing her almost every week, I was always surprised at her tiny size. Her take-charge attitude – no doubt left over from her days as an elementary school teacher – made her seem much bigger than four feet eleven and a hundred and five pounds.

"So what's wrong?" I asked, as she preceded me through the combination mud and laundry room into the kitchen. I hoped she wouldn't notice the kitchen cupboards needed wiping down. I loved white pine, but it showed every sticky fingerprint.

"Let me say hello to my grandcats first."

Her eldest grandcat had heard the car, too, and came mincing across the red brick-patterned linoleum on delicate black paws. George, our Siamese/tabby cross, had been King of Holly Haven ever since we'd moved in five years before. He had dark tabby stripes, large green eyes and a Type A personality that made him, in spite of weighing only ten pounds, a force to be

reckoned with. He'd been dubbed Georgius Felinus Rex by Ben, who had a passion for Latin and ancient Rome and the name suited his outsized ego and regal dignity. Maggie cuddled him against her chest while he purred, green eyes half-closed in ecstasy.

"You are such a precious," Maggie crooned. "I wish I still lived here so you could curl up on my pillow at night." I couldn't help smiling. When Maggie moved here from Moose Jaw, she didn't like cats. Five years ago, Ben hadn't liked cats either but now they were both adoring slaves of the resident felines.

George decided he didn't want to be called 'precious' – no doubt preferring 'majestic' or 'awe-inspiring' – and demanded to be put down.

Maggie did as she was told and I followed her into the living room, where our Applehead Siamese seal points, Kaylie and Ming, were napping on the sofa. She gave the two cats a few strokes. They yawned and stretched in acknowledgment. "Is Kaylie still trying to boot George off the throne?"

"She's watching for the least sign of weakness," I said. Kaylie was dainty and petite, eight pounds of unrepentant terrorist. Ming, thumping in at twenty-four pounds, was a gentle worrier who tried to look after everybody. Kaylie had taken full advantage of that when she birthed her only litter. Ming spent twice as much time with the kittens as she did.

"Where are the kittens?" Maggie asked.

"They're not kittens anymore. They're almost a year old."

"Well, teenagers then."

"They went out with Nicky and Ben," I said. "They're either helping Ben by digging holes in the garden or stalking some unsuspecting creature."

"Not the hens, I trust."

"With Mr. Mighty on guard? Never." Our Leghorn rooster put the run on everybody except Nicky with his thick, white Samoyed fur.

The cat flap in the back door rattled and our three teenagers galloped through the mud room, sounding like a herd of ponies. They raced down the hall bisecting our house, past Ben's den, our bedroom and bath, then past the stairs that went up to the guest bedrooms, then the door to my den, bounced off the front door as they turned the corner, and erupted into the living room. Poppy and Caesar had chocolate points, crossed eyes, and kinked tails, like Ming, who was a throwback. Cato, however, was living proof of Kaylie's illicit affair. He was well-named, a talkative politician with blue eyes who kept his pure white fur spotless and followed George everywhere, intent on learning how to put down peasant revolts. Maggie petted them all and, their curiosity satisfied, they completed their circle tour by trotting through the dining room and kitchen, and back outside.

I put out mugs, cream, and sugar. "Come and have your coffee and tell me what's bothering you." Everyone sat at the kitchen table to drink coffee, make plans and gossip. It was the heartbeat of the house and stood, symbolically, at the center of the kitchen.

Maggie sighed as she reached for the cream jug. "Trevor told Norma he's going to sue The Islands Trust to get her property back."

"That's sickening!" The year before, Norma had deeded her hundred and sixty acres to The Islands Trust for parkland, subject to a life tenancy for herself. Her only child, Trevor, a wealthy surgeon in Victoria, had been trying to get control of the property for several years so he could develop it, which was why I'd got myself elected as trustee. I wanted to make absolutely certain the old-growth forest and sloping meadows were designated as park in the community plan. I didn't want the serenity of the pioneer farm destroyed by hotels, marinas, and golf courses.

"I don't think he's actually done it yet," Maggie said. "But Norma is devastated. She's been feeling low, anyway, ever since the tragedy in January."

My heart ached for Norma. Barely eight months ago, her son had tried to get her designated as mentally incompetent, hoping to take her land. Then her three oldest cats, Pyewacket, Tigger and Whiskey, had died of feline infectious peritonitis, all within the space of one week in January. The three youngest, Smoke, Doran, and Blue Eyes, had escaped the FIP, but I knew Norma was grieving for the others and would for a long time. I still missed my beloved Buddhist cat, Henry, and he'd been gone for more than two years. "Are the cats and BJ still grieving, too?" BJ was Norma's roly-poly long-haired red dachshund, as much enslaved to cats as our Nicky.

"They're getting over it. Smoke is regaining the weight he lost and Doran no longer insists on sleeping with Norma every night. Blue Eyes has stopped clawing the couch."

Maggie ran her fingers through her short auburn hair. Dyed, of course, much to Ben's disgust, but it fitted her youthful attitude. I found it difficult, now, to believe I'd once disliked Maggie. But that was when we used to visit her in Saskatchewan, and she was a rigid authoritarian named Edith. Her husband's death and her own heart attack had brought profound changes, including her name.

"It's Norma I'm worried about," she continued. "I don't know whether she's physically ill or depressed about the cats and Trevor."

"Last year, after she got over the pneumonia, her doctor said she was in great shape. Sounds like it's time she saw him again."

"I've suggested she make an appointment, but she keeps putting it off. She's such a stubborn old biddy."

"Takes one to know one." I pushed the plate of shortbread toward her. I only realized how worried Maggie was when she didn't respond to my teasing.

"Holly, I'll look after Norma if there's anything wrong, but I may need help. Would you be able to give me a hand now and then?"

"Naturally! No need to even ask." It wasn't likely I'd be called on to do much. Norma had lived her entire life on Adriana and many people would be willing to help. Before I could remind her of that fact, Ben came in for his morning coffee, followed by Nicky, looking for anything edible and eager to soak up all the attention he could get.

"Good morning, Mother," Ben said, giving Maggie a peck on the cheek, "you're looking chipper."

"I'm perfectly well, Benjamin." She gave him a sharp look. "You're beginning to show your age, though. I can see gray hairs in your beard."

"I could dye it," he said. "Red, so we'd match."

Despite the difference in height – Ben was five foot nine – he and his mother did look somewhat alike. Both had blue eyes. Both had high cheekbones and fairly heavy eyebrows. Ben's hair was a sandy blond, like Maggie's before she went completely white. My long, black hair was now laced with so much silver that it almost matched theirs.

"My hair is auburn, not red," Maggie said.

"Whatever." Ben poured himself a mug of coffee. "I refuse to dye mine, though. I've earned my gray hair."

Nicky put his shaggy head in Maggie's lap, gazing up at her with a soulful look that no self-respecting cat would ever deign to use. She buried her hands in his thick white fur and scratched his neck. "Don't remind me of your age, Benjamin. It reminds me all too clearly of my own."

He sat at the table and reached for a shortbread cookie. "You're out early today."

I refilled Maggie's mug while she told Ben about Trevor's threat to sue The Islands Trust. "I thought he might just be giving her a bad time for thwarting him," she said, "but Norma is convinced he means it."

Ben looked at me. "You haven't heard anything, have you?"

"Not a word. I really don't think he could get a reputable lawyer to take it on. Norma was told by her own lawyer that her agreement with The Islands Trust was rock-solid. I'm sure it was also checked by the Trust's lawyer."

"Maybe Trevor will get a disreputable lawyer," Ben said. "If the case goes to court, it could be a real mess. And take forever."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Maggie looked worried.

"There's nothing you can do about it, Mother."

"But Norma's really upset," Maggie said.

"Sure she is," Ben said. "But tell her not to worry. Common sense will prevail."

"I wish I could be that optimistic," Maggie sighed. "Benjamin, are your hens laying these days?"

"Spring is sprung," Ben said, "and the eggs are starting to roll again. Want some?"

"Yes, please. But not the little green ones." We had white Leghorns and Rhode Island Reds who laid normal eggs and tiny Araucanas who laid little green eggs that none of my egg customers were willing to buy. "Are those funny little hens still laying under the blackberry hedges?"

"They are," I said. If they went broody and raised a family, Nicky would be pleased. He adored herding chicks.

"Don't bad-mouth my Araucanas," Ben said. "They're the cutest birds around, with those little tufts of feathers on top of their heads."

I looked at Maggie and shrugged. Soon after we'd moved to Holly Haven, five years before, Ben had acquired the nickname St. Francis of Assisi because he couldn't resist the blandishments of any animal, feathered or furred, a fact I swore was known by every deer, bird, and squirrel within a ten-mile radius, not to mention our own menagerie.

Maggie pushed her chair back. "I'd better get some groceries. Nothing has been resolved, but I feel better now that we've talked about it a little."

"Maybe it's time Norma adopted a kitten," I said.

"She can have Caesar," Ben said from the mud room. "That blasted cat snuck in while I was having coffee and buried another dead mouse in my boot."

"Ben, you don't really mean that." I don't know why I bothered to say it. We both knew he didn't really mean it.

"See you later, Mother." Ben went out. I heard the clash of the garbage can lid and then Ben walked by the kitchen sundeck, heading for the greenhouse.

"It's too soon for another cat," Maggie said.

"A kitten might take her mind off Trevor."

"It could work, I suppose." Maggie smiled wryly. "A kitten would be loyal and much easier to deal with than Trevor."

"They both mark territory, though."

"Yes, but cats only spray; they don't hire lawyers."



A few days later, I drove to Mora Bay for the trustees' monthly meeting, held in a small room at the Yellow Duck, a sprawling waterfront pub. The room was meant for private parties and, like the rest of the pub, had utilitarian round tables, chairs with plastic-covered pads and insipid paintings of sailing ships on the wall. Outside, sunlight sparkled on the pleasure boats, trawlers, and seiners in the marina, and on the rainbow of oily water in the slip where the Victoria ferry docked. I would have preferred sitting out on the deck, where I could listen to water gurgle around the pilings underneath the cedar planks, but if we met in plain view, somebody was bound to buttonhole us about the community plan or the ferry fares or perhaps even their Aunt Susan's lost dog. I gave one longing glance at the spring day, plugged in my laptop, and opened WordPerfect, ready to take minutes.

Duff came in, his grocer's smock straining over an ample belly. "Where's Joanna?" He glanced out the picture window. "Oh, there she comes. I'll go and help her tie up." The third trustee for each island had to be a trustee from another island and, when the sea was calm, Joanna came from nearby Melfort Island in her own little boat.

By the time he was out on the dock, Joanna had secured her runabout and was striding toward him, wearing her usual costume of rubber boots, jeans, and plaid shirt. Her grandparents had been the first settlers on Melfort, and she'd inherited their farm, where she tended sheep, goats, chickens, and a garden. In her early fifties, she was strong and wiry with short gray hair and gray eyes. She gave the impression that she could run the entire country without even getting flustered.

Duff followed her into the room and we sat down. "Here's the mail." He tossed two legal-size white envelopes on the table. "They both arrived this morning. One's routine and one's trouble. Which do you want first?"

"Let's get rid of the routine one." Joanna reached across the table and picked up the letters. She opened the top one and read it. "This one, right? Deanna and Peter Perry are applying for permission to cut down trees on their property."

"That would be Rollin RV Park," I said. "Five acres, beachfront, on this side of Gordon Bay, across from Norma Brentwood's property." Deanna Perry was Trevor Brentwood's sister-in-law and every bit as greedy. "What reason do they give?"

"They say the trees spoil the view for their customers." Joanna handed me the letter. "That sounds like a pile of sheep, uh, droppings."

"Last fall, Cal Peterson told me that Deanna asked him to fell some trees because she wanted to make money," I said.

"Profit makes more sense than improving the view." Duff moistened a finger and smoothed one of his salt and pepper sideburns. "Under the bylaws, no trees more than one foot in diameter can be cut down without our permission. I'm for letting them take down a few at least."

"I'm against letting them cut any." Every time I remembered that Deanna had shut an abandoned kitten up without food or water, I wanted to use a power saw on her. "If their customers want a view, all they have to do is walk down a short path to the beach."

Joanna nodded. "I've seen the place. The Perrys have those RV sites packed in so tight all their customers can see is one another."

"So, what it amounts to," said Duff, "is they want the cash."

"Do we turn them down then?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Joanna said. "It's no crime to want a profit. And it's their property. I agree with Duff that we let them take a few trees down."

I wanted to delay the evil deed as long as possible. "Let's get Derek to have a look at the

property and give us his opinion. There might be a problem with erosion." Derek Jamison, an ecology student from the University of Victoria, had just begun the inventory of geography, species of flora and fauna, and ecosystems for our community plan.

Duff smiled. "Holly, you're turning into a fine politician. The kid might actually find a good reason for saving some of the trees. That would suit me."

Joanna said, "He can also mark the ones to be cut on a plan of the property, which will save one of us going out there to look at them."

"One of us, and it better not be me, should inspect the property after the trees are cut, too," I said.

"Why not you?" Joanna raised her eyebrows.

"Deanna ran against me in the trustees' election."

She grinned. "Sore loser, huh?"

"I haven't received any hate mail, but she wasn't happy. She had a very different agenda for what should happen on Adriana, no doubt dictated by Trevor." I quickly typed in a few notes about the conversation. "Duff, will you talk to Derek tonight?"

"Sure can." He handed me the other letter.

It was from a lawyer in Vancouver, giving notice of a suit by Trevor Brentwood against his mother, along with the Islands Trust, Ben and me, Duff, Joanna, and Ben's mother, Maggie, for the wrongful alienation of his birthright. For a second I felt sad for Norma. Then I was furious. Ben, Maggie, and I were getting sued, too.

"What does that sleazy little bastard think he's doing!" I could feel the blood pounding in my face.

Duff reached over and patted my hand. "Trying to get Norma's quarter section back so he can develop it, something he's been salivating over for years."

"I know that, Duff, but why is he suing everybody in sight? I mean, he might as well name our cats and Nicky, too!"

"Read the rest," Duff said. "He says you all influenced his mother against him."

Joanna raised her eyebrows. "Did you?"

"You're damn right I did!"

Duff gave me a solemn look. "Don't say that to anyone but us, Holly. I don't think he'll get anywhere because he's going up against The Islands Trust, which is pretty much the same as trying to buck the government. But until the Trust makes this suit go away, don't admit to anything."

"Oh, all right." I slumped back in my chair. "I wish we could get this community plan done right away, so Norma's land will truly be safe from development."

"On Melfort, it took nearly two years." Joanna ticked items off on her fingers. "We have to finish developing policies for the community, then have information meetings and consultations and then a public hearing."

Duff added, "And, since the community plan itself isn't a law, we have to draft a zoning bylaw to make it legal and that also requires a public hearing. On top of that, it has to go to the Trust Council for approval."

"Oh, wonderful! Should be a snap!" But being sarcastic wouldn't get me anywhere. "In the meantime, what are we going to do about Trevor?"

"I'll phone the Trust's lawyer," Duff said. "I've met him, and I think he'll give us good advice."

"Do you think Ben and Maggie and I should get a lawyer?"

Joanna shook her head. "I wouldn't be in a hurry. This could all blow over."

We spent the next couple of hours looking at Derek's preliminary reports and kicking around land use policies I'd gleaned from other island communities via the Web. When Joanna said, "Come on, let's call it quits for today. I could do with some lunch," I was on my feet before Duff could even offer an opinion.

We moved out into the main room of the pub and ordered beer and hamburgers. The decor of the pub might be pure motel, but the food was always good. By the time I'd finished my hamburger, I thought we might actually escape what Ben called Duff's 'fact of the day.' But no such luck.

Duff said, with that sincere, rapt expression he always wore at such times, "Did you know that the acid in your stomach is strong enough to dissolve razor blades?"

"I'd love to sprinkle some on Trevor," I said.

Joanna smiled. "If he's made of plastic rather than human flesh, as I suspect, nothing will destroy him."

"Holly, you're a farmer's wife," Duff said. "Don't you know that salt is the usual weapon against garden slugs?"



When I came home, Ben was tilling the far side of the garden. I put the coffee on, saw that all the cats were recharging their batteries with afternoon naps, finished the meeting minutes and emailed them to Duff and Joanna. I needed to do more research on community plans, but it would have to wait until I talked to Ben. A letter identical to the one the trustees had received was lying on the kitchen table, so I knew he'd read it.

He and Nicky came in half an hour later, looking pleased. "Finished the tilling. Now I can start planting the hardier seeds." Sunlight streamed across the sundeck and in through the glass sliding doors, highlighting dust motes floating above the dark red linoleum. If this weather kept up, the garden would be off to an early start.

"What do you think of that letter? The trustees got one this morning, too."

"Trevor Brentwood is a disgusting excuse for a man." Ben sat at the table with his mug of coffee. "I don't know how he can treat his mother that way."

"But what if he wins? If we have to hire a lawyer, it'll ruin your budget." Ben had worked as a cost accountant for years and developing stringent budgets for Holly Haven was one of his favorite pastimes.

"You worry too much. I'll bet you a quarter the case never gets to court. Besides, you and Duff and Joanna won't allow him to develop that land."

"We're only trustees for another year and a half. If Deanna gets elected next time, instead of me, and the third trustee is somebody other than Joanna, he might get away with it."

Ben had just opened his mouth to reply when George streaked across the kitchen table, Kaylie right on his tail. The plate of cookies escaped demolition by a hair's breadth.

"Hey, you two, what's going on here?" I demanded. "You know you're not allowed on the table."

When I caught up with them, Kaylie was standing at the foot of the piano, tail thrashing. George was crouched on top, swearing at her in Siamese.

"Kaylie, what are you trying to do? George rules this household." She turned her back on me and stalked out, every delicate inch bristling.

I carried George to my big chair and cuddled him. "I know you're eleven and getting to be a grumpy old man, your majesty, but I didn't think you'd ever give up the throne to a brat like Kaylie."

He grumbled deep in his throat and then began to purr. I thought about his history with Kaylie and decided this episode was more likely the result of habit than any weakening of his hold on the throne. Kaylie had chased him when she was a kitten, too, and rather than belting her into the middle of next week, as he probably should have done, he played the gentleman and escaped to some safe retreat she couldn't reach.

"George," I said, "when Kaylie was little, she was only playing when she chased you. Now she's dead serious. If you want to keep your position as ruler of Holly Haven, you'd better take steps."



II -- Shazaam

May Day fell on a Monday and, at midmorning, I stood in the kitchen with my second cup of coffee, daydreaming about crowning Kaylie as Queen of the May. She was sitting on a chair with her dark brown tail wrapped around her paws, looking exceptionally regal. I was thinking that a crown made of the buttercups that were scattered through our lawn like shining golden stars would look perfect on her creamy head. Before I could do anything about it, the phone rang.

It was Maggie. "Are you going to be home for a while, Holly? I have something to tell you." Her voice sounded shaky.

"I have to go to Mora Bay and mail our tax returns. I wouldn't dare miss the deadline when Ben sat up until two this morning to finish them. How about meeting me there for lunch? The Yellow Duck at noon?"

"I thought April thirtieth was the income tax deadline."

"It usually is, but because it fell on Sunday this year, the tax department extended the deadline by one day."

"Oh," Maggie said. "That was nice of them. And I'd rather go to The Apple Tree."

The Apple Tree was more upmarket than The Yellow Duck but popular because it also had a more varied menu. Maggie liked it because they always had vegetarian entrees on offer. "That's fine with me. Let's make it quarter to twelve so we're sure to get a table."

On my way into town, slowing down to admire a Japanese plum tree swathed in pink blooms, thus annoying the logging truck on my tail, it occurred to me that it was time Ben thought up a new income tax joke. Every April, he moaned about not being able to claim the cats as dependents. But if I complained of boredom, he'd probably moan about not being allowed to claim all the chickens. I decided to forget the whole thing and, in spite of more plum trees, dropped our tax returns in the mail, bought groceries, including fifty pounds of last year's carrots for the deer and made it to The Apple Tree by eleven forty-five.

Maggie was already there. We hugged and got settled at our table with coffees and menus before I said anything, but I could see that she had been crying.

"What's wrong, Maggie? Is it Norma?"

"Yes, dear." Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, and she swallowed, then took a deep breath. "Her doctor says she has pancreatic cancer."

"Oh, my God." Tears welled up in my eyes, too, but this was not the time or the place to let them flow. Unless one was very careful, living in a small community guaranteed that other people knew what you were doing or saying almost before you did yourself. "He's sure? Norma seemed so well last summer and fall."

"He's sure," Maggie said. "And she was feeling fine back then. But Trevor's idiocy and the death of those precious cats were hard blows."

The waitress appeared at my elbow, and I ordered the soup and sandwich special without asking what it was. I couldn't concentrate on the menu. "Is she in pain?"

"Not yet. She's losing her appetite, though."

"I thought she looked thinner last time I saw her." The guilty realization that I hadn't found time to visit Norma and Maggie for at least six weeks made me squirm. Somehow, I'd allowed the trusteeship to take over my life. I made a silent promise to myself to stop spending every moment on the damn community plan.

"Her doctor told her that depression is one of the symptoms," Maggie said, toying with the

battered asparagus on her plate. "So perhaps it isn't Trevor causing it."

"Maybe not, but his actions must certainly be making the condition worse."

"I know," Maggie sighed. "The doctor says it's too late for an operation, but he wants her to have chemotherapy and radiation."

"What for? Isn't pancreatic cancer a death sentence?"

"Norma hasn't made any decisions about treatment. She's still too shocked at learning she has only six months to live."

"Shit!"

"I don't approve of your language, Holly, dear, but it expresses my feelings, too."

"Would she like company? I want to come and see her. So will Ben, though he won't know what to say to her. I'm not sure I do myself."

"As long as it's just you and Ben," Maggie said, "she'll be happy to see you. She doesn't want anyone else to know, not even Trevor."

That surprised me. "You mean she hasn't told him?"

"She can't stand the thought of having him around. He'd probably harangue her about the property, no matter how sick she is."

"She should have drowned him at birth," I said. "Do you want dessert?"

"No, I'm going home. I don't like leaving her alone for too long. And, Holly, Trevor was probably quite lovable as a baby."

"Nothing will ever make me believe that."



That afternoon at coffee-time, I told Ben about Norma and he looked sad. "Poor Norma," he said, "she hasn't had an easy time the last two or three years."

Nicky whined and put his paw on my lap. He always seemed to know when his two pack leaders were upset. I petted him but instead of leaving after a minute or so, as he usually did, he nudged my hand for more comfort.

Ben put his mug in the sink. "Let's go over there now and see if there's anything we can do. They're going to need help with that big garden."

"They might not bother with the garden this year."

"They both need their veggies," Ben said firmly. "I'll plant it if they can't manage."

We left Nicky to guard the house, from the inside, of course. If we left him outside, he'd wander off looking for us and, because he was so friendly, it might be days before we found him. I could hear him howling as we climbed into Ben's ancient truck, Bouncing Blue Betsy, but the rattling rumble of the pickup soon drowned him out.

The road took us south past Mora Bay and Rollin RV Park, giving me the chance to aim a sneer at the Perrys and mutter to myself about losing more trees from their property. Then we drove around the curve of Gordon Bay and pulled into Norma's front yard, which ended at the high tide line. The tide was out, leaving a pungent odor of seaweed stranded and drying over rocks. An occasional tiny spurt of water betrayed the presence of a clam under the wet sand.

Norma's red-haired sausage dog, BJ, came scuttling out to greet us. He wiggled and squirmed with delight, then led us up the steps, past a purple lilac bush in full bloom. The sweet powerful scent drowned out even the seaweed.

Maggie was waiting at the screen door. "I'm glad you came. We've just been discussing the garden."

We both hugged Norma and managed to get through an uncomfortable couple of minutes while all four of us tried to arrange our faces into normal afternoon-tea expressions by fussing over which chairs to sit on.

"So what do you think about the garden?" Ben said, bypassing the urgent subject on everyone's mind.

"I want to plant one." Norma's voice was firm. Her body, though dressed as usual in jeans and plaid shirt, looked fragile enough to break and her skin had a slightly yellow cast. "Maggie thinks it will be too much work, but I want to see new peas and carrots and potatoes out there one last time."

Her attitude made me feel better. I hoped that when my turn came, I could be that brave and that clear about what I wanted.

"I'll bring the Rototiller over," Ben said. "It'll take me less than a day to till the whole thing and make rows where you want them."

"Are you sure you have time, Benjamin?" Maggie asked.

"Most of ours is already planted," he said. "A week earlier than last year. I still have seedlings to set out, but they can wait a day or two."

Norma leaned forward. "I want to get my hands into the soil and plant as much as I can myself."

"Well, don't overdo it," Ben said.

Norma's laugh startled me. "Getting sore muscles seems highly irrelevant now. I'm going to do exactly what I want, as long as my body lets me. This disease may be Nature's way of telling me to slow down, but I won't do that until I have to."

Ben rose. "I'll take a look outside and see if I need to bring any tools beside the tiller." He disappeared into the kitchen and went out the back door. Then the cat door slammed three times and Norma's cats marched into the living room.

Smoke led the pack, twenty pounds of chunky cat in a cloud of short, soft smoke-gray fur. He blinked yellow eyes at me and meowed a greeting so quiet I barely heard it.

"His voice needs to put some weight on," I said.

"It'll never happen." Norma smiled. "He doesn't use it enough."

Smoke was heading for my lap when Doran, the long-haired gray and white boy, shouldered him out of the way. Doran's neck ruff and ear tufts hinted that some of his ancestors were Maine coon cats. His impish expression, large green eyes and enormous froth of a tail made him my favorite of Norma's cats.

"Come up here and see me, bad boy," I said. Doran always had to be where the action was, looking at it, climbing on it, sniffing it, making comments. Sometimes he scratched things, too, to see what sounds he could make with his claws. He jumped onto my lap, flopped over on his back, and let me caress his white tummy.

Blue Eyes rubbed against my calf, then put her front paws on my lap. She was an affectionate ginger tabby with such long, slim legs that I was sure she had a Siamese gene or two. With my free hand, I reached out to pet her, but too late.

Doran bounced up and swung at her. She ducked, backed away and trotted over to leap up on the arm of Norma's chair. Smoke jumped up on the other arm and BJ sprawled at Norma's feet. Doran snorted, expelling air in a short burst, the same way that I did when I was too hot.

"Are you huffing at Blue Eyes or me, Doran?"

"He's annoyed that you tried to pet Blue Eyes when he was having his special time with you," Maggie said.

"So 'huff' is a statement of disgust? I don't recall him doing that before."

"He only started in January," Norma said. "I think it means he's asserting his authority now that Pyewacket is gone." Pyewacket had been even tinier and more delicate than Kaylie, but she'd ruled Norma's cats – and Norma – with an iron paw.

"It looks like Smoke and Blue Eyes don't mind him being boss," I said.

"They're easy-going. But I notice he doesn't 'huff' much at Smoke."

"Understandable." Ben came through the doorway from the kitchen. "Smoke must weigh nearly double what Doran does."

Maggie brought tea in, and we chatted about the garden and the house for another half hour. I didn't have the heart to say anything about Trevor's suit. And anyway, what was the point? I didn't even ask Norma what her doctor had said. We all knew the score. If Norma wanted to talk about it, she'd bring up the subject herself.

We left, Ben promising to return in a couple of days with the Rototiller. It wasn't until we walked into our own kitchen, where Nicky refused to look at us, his usual punishment for leaving him, that I realized the full implications of Norma's impending death.

"Ben, I just realized Maggie will have to move back in with us. And she'll bring three cats and a dog with her. There'll be fights over territory and hurt feelings and blood and never another peaceful moment!"



At nine that evening, I was still feeling frantic about the prospect of living with nine cats, two dogs and two alpha adult humans. I'd tried to distract myself by doing dishes, tucking up the chickens for the night and watching Ben feed raccoons on the kitchen sundeck, but none of it worked.

"But you love cats." Ben handed me a scotch.

"You know perfectly well I'm a sucker for anything that meows at me. And so are you. But Doran will try to take the throne from George and that's not fair. George is having enough trouble with Kaylie." I collapsed into my favorite chair, having first removed a couple of Siamese teenagers. "The only solution I can think of is for Maggie to move back in with Cal."

"No way!" Ben's expression was fierce. "My mother's eighty-one and it's just not right for her to shack up with a younger man."

"For goodness sake, Cal must be at least seventy-two." Poppy and Caesar hopped up on my lap and settled down. If they couldn't lie directly on the chair, they'd lie on me. Kaylie and Ming were snuggled on the couch, as usual, and George was lording it over everyone from the top of the piano, with his disciple, Cato, beside him. "And we know it wouldn't work, anyway, because they tried it before. They're both too independent to live in a partnership."

"Isn't there any way Maggie could go on living in Norma's house?"

"I don't see how. It would be good for the animals to stay in their own territory, but Norma's tenancy will end with her death. That means the Islands Trust will be free to do as they like with it. If they go along with our idea to make the house into a heritage site, it'll need to be cleared and some renovation done before it's open to the public."

Ben took a sip of his beer. "I wonder if she has enough money to rent a house somewhere. I'd better talk to her."

"That's a good idea, but as far as I know, there's nothing available. Even if there were, owners aren't usually keen about renting to tenants with animals."

"They could all be outside," Ben said, "the same way they are now. We've never had any problem with ours being indoor-outdoor cats."

"I know, but every cat we've adopted was an indoor-outdoor cat when he came. If George couldn't go to the cedar shrub by the gate and get his p-mail every day, he'd probably destroy the house and us along with it. Our whole five acres..."

"Two hectares." Ben adored the metric system, which was no doubt admirably suited to cost accounting but didn't appeal to me in the least. He corrected me every time I annoyed him by clinging to the familiar intricacies of imperial measure.

"Our whole property is the cats' territory and I think the reason they rarely go off it is because it's big enough for all of them. If we transplant Norma's three cats to a different place, they'll try to go back to Norma's farm. They might succeed, too. Which means that wherever Maggie goes, the cats will have to stay indoors or be fenced in."

"That's cruel," Ben said.

"It's for their own good. If all Norma's cats had been kept indoors, the oldest three wouldn't have contracted FIP and died." I held out my glass for another scotch. "I can't move; I have cats in my lap."

When he came back with my refill, I said, "Maybe we could close in the front veranda with glass or netting and Norma's cats could live there."

"But that would prevent us using the front door."

"We never use it anyway, except to go sit on the veranda. I don't know why we even call it the front door. Everybody uses the back door."

"That's because the driveway ends at the back door," Ben said patiently. "It wouldn't make sense to walk all the way around the house to come in the front door. Besides, the mud room is at the back door."

I decided it was time to return to my previous argument. "We should think about building an outdoor run for ours so they'll be safe from any diseased cats wandering around. Wild animals carry diseases, too."

"I'm more worried about other animals being safe from George."

"All the more reason for a run."

"Let's not talk about it tonight."

That meant he didn't ever want to talk about it. In one way, I agreed with him. It was wonderful to see the cats climbing trees and wandering through the jungle of uncut grass in the meadow that sloped down toward the sea. It was fun when they went with us down to the beach and picked their way through the gravel, sniffing delicious fishy odors and making empty threats against seagulls. But, was the freedom worth the risk?



Next day, when Ben came in for morning coffee, he said, "I took a walk around our property this morning and there's a spot between the garden and the south fence that would do for a house for Maggie."

I stopped stirring my coffee and stared at him. "You mean we should build one for her?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"It would absolutely destroy your budget. And anyway, where would we get the money?" Like a bad dream, the summer we'd spent renovating our own two-story house flooded my mind. The upheaval, the trips to Mora Bay for lumber, hardware, and paint, feeding a dozen people, a

thousand decisions to make every day.

Ben looked unconcerned. "We already have the land, and we can get water free from Ken Dyckman's lake." When we built the greenhouse, we'd tapped into Ken's pipeline from the lake that lay behind a hill on his property. "All I have to do is run a line from the top of the garden."

"But building materials are so expensive now. So are carpenters and plumbers."

"Cal can do all that stuff and, because it's for Maggie, I bet he'll charge a reasonable rate."

"But where are we going to get the cash?"

"Take a mortgage out on our property."

"A mortgage? At our age? Why would you even think of doing that when we own this place free and clear?"

"What's our age got to do with it? Anyway, we're not old." Ben poured a second cup of coffee, fortifying himself for more argument. "I need to provide a home for my mother, and this will work. You don't want her to live with us because of the problems with animals, and I don't want her to live with us because she'd drive me crazy, like she did before. She's always got some new harebrained scheme she wants to try."

"The trouble with you and Maggie is that you both want to be boss. What neither of you seems to realize is that George is boss." Ben loved his mother, as I did, but it would be easier on all of us if she had her own place.

As if he'd read my mind, George the Magnificent padded into the kitchen, floated onto my lap and gave me a lecture about the breakfast I'd served him. He didn't like the new wet food we'd bought. Nicky ate it up in two seconds and George didn't like that either. And, though he'd eaten my second offering, he still seemed annoyed about the inconvenience to his royal person. I soothed him and pretended not to notice when Ben slid a ginger snap off the plate and into Nicky's eager jaws.

"We're in good shape financially," Ben said. "We have no debts. We both have pensions, and the greenhouse is making some profit. So getting a mortgage shouldn't be a problem."

"I'm sure the bank will be delighted to give us the money. But can we afford to make the payments?"

"Yes, if my mother can afford to pay us rent out of her pensions. I know she's got a nest egg, but I don't want her to touch that. She might need it."

"But what do we do with this new house when Maggie dies?"

"She isn't going to die!" Ben looked exasperated. "Well, not for a long, long time. Just because Norma is unlucky, it doesn't mean Maggie will be. As for the house, I suppose it can eventually be rented to someone else."

"I don't think I want to be a landlady. Or have strangers living so close."

Ben shoved his chair back and rose. "Maybe Gareth and Sue will come and live in it when they retire." Gareth was Ben's only son, a computer tech in Campbell River.

"It'll be years before Gareth is ready to retire. And if they move in next door, we really will have to build runs for the cats. Otherwise, Beanbag would have a nervous breakdown." Beanbag, Gareth and Sue's corgi, was terrified of cats.

Ben put his boots back on. "I'll talk to Maggie about the house this weekend. If she agrees, I'll draw up some plans and we can get started right away."

"Let's call it a cottage instead of a house. It would make me feel less overwhelmed."

"Whatever you want."

"We'll have to apply to the trustees for permission to build."

He stood up. "I'll draft up something after I've talked to Maggie. I don't see any problems

with it. I can have a word with Duff, and I know you'll vote in favor."

"I probably won't be allowed to vote. But supposing I am, don't be too sure that I'll vote yes. After all, I have to give due consideration to things like septic fields and potable water and community input."

"Yeah, yeah." Ben headed back to the garden, Nicky at his heels. When I looked out the patio door a bit later, Kaylie, Caesar, Cato, and Poppy were in the garden, watching Ben plant a few more pumpkin seeds so the deer would have plenty of food in the fall. They followed along behind him, digging up what he'd just buried to see what it was.

With most of the household involved in horticulture, it was the perfect time to hide in my den and do more research about official community plans. On my way down the hall, I looked into the living room to see if Ming was there. As usual, when he was on his own, he was curled up in Ben's chair. As a kitten, he'd gone after a purple martin chick and been attacked by the whole family of purple martins. Ever since then wild birds terrified him, and he rarely went outside until after dark. I felt sorry for him, but Ben kept saying that all cats should be afraid of birds. I'd respond with, "But almost every wild creature eats other wild creatures." St. Francis would have none of it, of course.

As I went into my den, I thought about Trevor Brentwood. If a flock of angry ladies attacked him, would he become civilized and stop stalking his mother? Probably not. I sighed. A flock of lawyers might be the only answer.



Ming's nightly travels brought a surprise later that night. When Ben turned on the television for the eleven o'clock news, a muffled 'mrow' attracted my attention. Ming stood in the archway between living and dining rooms, carrying a skinny kitten by the scruff of the neck. Its fur looked matted and dirty.

"Ming!" I cried. "Where did you find that kitten? We don't need any more cats!"

Ming dropped the kitten, who streaked underneath the couch.

"Shazaam!" said Ben. "A magical disappearing cat!"

"Ming," I said, "you get that creature out from under the couch and take it back where you found it."

"Don't make him do that, Holly. The kitten is probably hungry." St. Francis turned off the television and went out to the kitchen. He came back with a small dish of food and another of water. "I found some cans of kitten food left over from when ours were little." He got down on his knees and pushed the dishes under the couch.

I knew there was no possibility of 'making' Ming do anything. He might be laid-back and gentle but, like all our cats, he regarded me as a servant. Ben called himself the Houseboy and my sporadic attempts to be Head Cat always ended in defeat.

"All right," I said, "I'll rescind that order. Ming, get under there and give that kitten a bath." The other five cats, led by George, were now lined up in front of the couch, peering underneath it and hissing. To my relief, Ming crawled in after the kitten. He'd keep the little creature safe from getting smacked by the rest of the crew.

"We should name the kitten," Ben said.

"What for? We're not keeping it."

"We can't just say 'it' all the time. We need to have something to call him or her until you take him or her to the SPCA."

"How did I get landed with that job?" I went to the mud room and bolted the cat door closed. "I don't want Ming going out and finding more strays. And I don't want to name the kitten until it's cleaned up and I can see it in daylight." I didn't want to name the kitten at all. If it had a name, it would feel like one of the family.

"Oh, I already have a name."

"What?"

"Shazaam."



III -- A Spy in Training

The next morning, I managed to sneak out of bed before the heap of fur sleeping at the foot woke up and started campaigning for breakfast. I slipped into my robe and went to look under the couch to see if Shazaam was still there. Two big blue eyes stared back at me. The kitten looked cleaner, and the food dish was empty.

"Come out, sweetie."

Blink.

"It's okay. You're safe. I've been trained by some very demanding cats."

Blink.

"Okay, don't come out." I washed and refilled the food dish and shoved it under the couch. The kitten wasn't yet ready to be sociable.

"Ming will look after Shazaam," Ben said, when we finally sat down to breakfast after feeding everyone else. "He was a good father to his own kittens."

"So good that he nearly had a nervous breakdown trying to keep track of them and went bald. We don't want that to happen again." I tossed a piece of bacon into Nicky's efficient maw. "Shazaam is a perfect illustration of why cats should have a closed-in run, rather than being allowed to run free outside and end up lost and hungry."

"But," said St. Francis, "Ming rescued her and brought her home, so everything turned out all right."

"How do you know the kitten is a 'she'?"

"Her fur looks soft, and she's got those gorgeous blue eyes."

Three teenage kittens stared at the bacon disappearing into my mouth. "Stop trying to make me feel guilty, kids. You've already had your breakfast." They didn't listen to me, of course, any more than Ben would if I told him to stop attempting to feed every animal on the island. "Ben, we're not going to keep that kitten."

"Why not? Seven cats are no more trouble than six."

"Except for the vet bills."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that part of it."

Ben must be completely smitten if the kitten made him forget his budget. "I wonder if Norma would like to have her. Assuming it is a 'her.' Taking care of a new baby might be something she'd like to do with the time she has left."

"Poor Ming," Ben said. "He'll be upset if you take his kitten away from him."

"Pardon? Who is it that's going to be upset?"

Ben pushed back his chair. "It's a nice sunny day out there. I'm going to load the Rototiller on Betsy and go do Norma's garden. I'll see you this afternoon sometime."



By Saturday, three days later, Shazaam had worked up enough courage to come out from under the couch. As soon as she did, Nicky picked her up and carried her around the same way he'd carried Kaylie and her kittens, with her whole head in his mouth. I thought that would frighten her, but she didn't seem to mind. I rescued her from Nicky's tender ministrations, wiped her dry and cuddled her for a moment while she purred. I'd never seen a kitten with such dramatic coloring. Her tail and ears were dark brown, a sharp contrast to her white belly, chest,

and lower half of her face. She had a pale sandy mask across her face and similar fur on her back. If she was anything like a Siamese, that fur would grow darker as she matured but for the moment, she was a streak of white punctuated with two dark carets at the beginning and a long dark dash at the end.

It was obvious the kitten was used to humans and a litter box, so I tried to discover where Ming had found her, but no one appeared to be worrying about a lost kitten. There'd been nothing in the paper, no notices at the SPCA or nailed to trees and telephone poles. The possibility that someone had simply dumped her made me furious, but at least she was safe now.

The other cats had stopped hissing at Shazaam and seemed willing to tolerate her as long as she didn't infringe on their favorite sleeping places. It was time to get her checked over, so I made an appointment for a couple of weeks later to take her to our vet, Jerry. I also wanted to know whether to say 'she' or 'he.' At least a name like Shazaam would fit either sex. If I had my way, it would get shortened to Shaz.

After lunch, I drove over to Norma's to have a visit with her before bringing Maggie home to talk with Ben about the proposed cottage.

"You should have come for lunch," Maggie said, as I settled in a big chair with Bad Boy Doran on my lap. "I made potato and cheese soup."

"Ben is upset so it was probably better that I ate his 'world famous' pea soup that he made yesterday and paid him lots of compliments on it." Doran flopped over on his back in the crook of my arm, pulled my face down to his with one paw and licked my nose. "Hey, cat! I did wash my face this morning."

Norma chuckled. "That's a new trick. I think it means he likes you."

"I like you, too, Doran, but I'm not altogether sure I want you to wash my face." The green eyes stared into mine for a couple of seconds. Then he huffed and jumped off my lap. "Oh, darn, I suppose I hurt his feelings."

"He'll survive," Norma said. "What's the matter with Ben? And how are your plans coming for his sixtieth birthday party?"

"Well, you know I intended the party to be a surprise, but Gareth phoned last night and mentioned to Ben that he's coming down from Campbell River for the party. So not only is the surprise element gone, Ben's angry. He says he doesn't want a party."

"Why not?" Maggie demanded.

"He thinks reaching sixty is no big deal and that it's silly to celebrate something like that. I told him the invitations went out a month ago and everybody's coming, so he'll just have to put up with being feted."

"He'll get over it, dear," Maggie said. "Ben was one of those boys who had to learn everything the hard way and apparently he still does." She stirred honey into her tea. "Have you done anything about food yet?"

"I haven't even made up a menu."

"Norma and I will do that, and we can also do a bit of the prep. What would he like in the way of a present?"

"He says he doesn't want any, but I have a suggestion for something that would really thrill him." Smoke eyed me, then made his move. "Oof! I wouldn't want to have both Smoke and Ming in my lap at the same time. They'd squash me."

"So, what does Ben want?" Maggie urged.

"Heritage seeds. Tomatoes, potatoes, any kind of vegetable you can find. And I have a present for you, Norma, if you want her." I told them about Shaz. "She's really cute, but six cats

are enough cute for me. Sometimes more than enough."

Norma looked thoughtful. "Let me think about it for a day or two. Maggie and I will talk it over. It would mean another animal for her to look after when I'm gone."

"We also need to think about what happens to the animals when I die," Maggie said. "Considering I'm eighty-one and a half, a kitten is sure to outlive me."

"I said something like that to Ben when he suggested we build a cottage for you on our land. I asked him what we'd do with the cottage after you're gone, and he got upset and said you weren't going to die for years and years."

"It sounds to me," Maggie said, "as though that boy doesn't want to face the fact that he's mortal."

"You may be right." I looked at Norma. "How are you feeling? Are you going to take the usual cancer treatments?"

"No." Norma's voice was firm. "Definitely not. The slash, burn, and poison routine is not for me."

"The doctor told her he wouldn't operate," Maggie said. "The cancer has spread too far. It probably started years ago. But he coaxed her about the chemo and radiation, saying the treatment might give her more time."

Norma's huff sounded almost exactly like Doran's. "What's the point if I'm going to feel ill all the time? Besides, from what I've read, those treatments will ruin my immune system. It makes sense to me that a strong immune system will fight the cancer and give me more time than radiation and poison."

"More quality time certainly," Maggie said. "I agree with her decision."

"I admire your courage, Norma," I said. "Not many people are willing to go against what their doctors say. What about painkillers?"

"I haven't needed any so far," she said, "but I know the time is coming when I'll have to accept them." She rose. "One thing I do need these days is an afternoon nap. I suppose my body is using up most of its energy arguing with the cancer cells. I'm glad you had time to visit, Holly. Come back soon." She went down the hall toward her bedroom, followed by three cats.

"Do the cats have naps with her?" I asked Maggie, as we got into my rather grubby white Chevy.

"They do now. I'm sure they know she's ill. They're always cuddled up to her when she sits or lies down, as if they're looking after her."

We were quiet on the way to Holly Haven. Part of me wondered what it would be like to know I only had six months to live. Another part looked with more appreciation than usual at the fresh green leaves on poplar and birch trees and the final spring showing of brilliant tulips in the front yards we passed on the outskirts of Mora Bay. If I had only six months, I'd spend a lot of time watching plants grow and cats play. I'd try to enjoy every minute. But was it possible to be aware of and enjoy every single minute as it passed?

I hadn't come even close to finding the answer by the time we came down Holly Haven's driveway and parked at the back door. Nicky bounced up and down, eager for us to get out of the car. He never barked at my car or Bouncing Blue Betsy. Ben said it was because he recognized the sound of the engines, a skill that eluded mere humans with their inefficient ears.

Ben came out on the back step and kissed his mother's cheek. "Did Holly tell you about maybe building a cottage?"

"She did and I think it's a fine idea."

Ben smiled, obviously pleased. "Good! Well, let's take a walk around and see which is the

best place to put it. Though I'm quite sure I know the answer."

"Show me," Maggie said.

Ben led the way along the fence that separated our land from Macklin Road. The fence was buried under such a mass of tangled blackberry vines we had no idea whether it was made of barbed wire or split rails. To our left was his big garden, surrounded by an eight-foot fence that kept the deer from feasting on his plants. Beyond the narrow western end of the garden strip was a hundred feet or so of clear meadow, used long ago as a horse paddock and beyond that, tall poplars and a boundary fence between us and the five-acre property to the south.

"This is the best spot," Ben said. "It's close to where I'd have to hook up to the water pipe from Dyckman's place and we can put in a new culvert and a driveway to Macklin Road."

"It has the same view of the sea as we get from our house," I said.

Maggie looked thoughtful. "No, I don't want a driveway, Benjamin. I'm not planning on buying a car. Cal will take me where I need to go."

"You don't have to depend on Cal all the time. Holly or I can drive you any place you want." Ben waved his hand at the meadow. "Trucks will have to bring in lumber and cement. And you won't want to carry bags of groceries all the way from our driveway."

"We'd need to put in a cattle guard, too," I said, "like the one on our own driveway."

"Why bother?" Ben looked at me. "Remember the time all of Ken Dyckman's Holsteins came wandering through our yard? The cattle guard didn't stop them."

Maggie stood a few feet away, one hand tucked under her chin, the other resting on Nicky's head. She was looking at the path we'd just walked. "Benjamin, if you put some gravel down, you could just run a driveway off the main one. There's room enough between the garden and the blackberry hedge."

"If you did that, you wouldn't have to deal with the highways department about road access and a culvert," I said.

"And it would give me more privacy," Maggie said. "The blackberries and the young alders in the corner would almost hide a cottage from the road."

A new voice intruded on the conversation. George the Magnificent bellowed a question as he picked his way through the grass on slim, delicate legs, snow-white Cato at his heels. Like Doran, George always wanted to know what his servants were doing and whether or not it was likely to inconvenience him.

"We're going to build a cottage for Maggie," I told him.

George walked up to Nicky, gave him a sniff, then sat down to see what odd things his two-legged slaves were going to do next.

Ben said, "All right, the driveway can curve to the left about here, to run up to a carport on the left side of the house."

"If I don't have a car, why do I need a carport?" Maggie asked.

"You might change your mind about the car," he said. I knew he was thinking of someday far down the road, when someone else might be living in the house.

Maggie gave him a sharp look. She knew what was in the back of his mind and that he didn't want to say it out loud. She turned and looked east, down the sloping meadow to the groves of Douglas fir, Garry oaks, maples, and arbutus at the foot of our property. Beyond the trees lay the ocean, sparkling under the late spring sunshine and curving around half a dozen islands farther out in the Strait. "It's not as close to the ocean as Norma's place, but I suppose Nicky and BJ would be pleased if I took them for walks down to the beach access."

"And good exercise, too," I said, "even if it is only a quarter mile." A road allowance and a

strip of bare lots on the waterfront paralleled our bottom fence. "I don't walk down there nearly as often as I thought I would."

"You and Ben are always too busy doing things. I plan to spend more of my time watching rocks grow. And having coffee with Cal." Cal lived in an ancient log house next door to us on the north side, along with his prize Angora goats and his cat, Daisy.

"We can put the cat run at the back of the house," I said. "The cats won't care if they don't have an ocean view."

"Cat run?" Maggie raised her eyebrows.

"If we don't confine Norma's cats to your cottage, I'm afraid there will be major territorial battles, especially between Doran and George. Not only that, but your three will try to find their way to their old territory and that's more than fifteen miles from here."

"Twenty-six kilometers," Ben said. "I hate to see animals confined, but Holly's right about territorial battles. This entire two-hectare property belongs to George. Always has and always will, as far as he's concerned."

Maggie nodded. "I'm inclined to agree with Holly about the cat run. It would keep them safe from other animals, too."

"They'd be very unhappy, though," Ben said. "I'd hate to deprive an animal of freedom once it's accustomed to going where it likes. Maybe we should just weather the fights between Doran and George."

"Doran is younger and heavier than George." Maggie bent down to stroke George's head. "I'd hate to see this aging gentleman get beaten up. No one can reason with Doran. He does exactly what he wants to do and if I smack him, he smacks me back. He doesn't take any sass from BJ or the other three cats either."

"The cats won't get proper exercise shut up in a house," Ben said.

Maggie turned to look at the trees along the south fence. "Maybe we could build the run long enough so it includes the lower part of one or two of those poplars. That would give them something to climb, at least."

Ben could huff quite as effectively as Doran. "You're talking a lot of money."

"I have some money, Benjamin. I can pay for the run myself."

"I don't want you using your nest egg for that."

Maggie scowled at Ben. "I'll spend my money on whatever I please."

"Let's talk about it later," I said. "Maggie, would you like to stay for supper?"

"No, thanks, dear. Norma spent a lot of time in the garden this morning and she needs to conserve her energy, so I'm doing the cooking tonight. I will come in and have some tea, though. Are the rest of my grandcats in the house?"

"When they're allowed to run free, you never know where they are," I said. "But they do always come home for dinner."

"You're exaggerating, Holly," Ben said. "They're almost always in the house."

"Just making a point," I said.

Ben huffed again.

When we came into the kitchen, Shaz was batting something across the linoleum. As soon as she saw Maggie, she streaked into the living room and disappeared under the couch.

Maggie asked, "Was that the kitten you want to give away?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "You'll have to get down on your knees to see her."

"Shazaam is training to be a spy." Ben plugged in the kettle. "She was under cover all of her first three days here."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Let's have tea first. If she hasn't come out by the time we're through, perhaps I'll give in and kneel to her. And perhaps I won't."

We spent the next half hour drinking tea while Ben and Maggie talked about the cottage. Neither of them mentioned the impending birthday party and I guessed that Maggie thought Ben's annoyance would evaporate if we ignored it. Ming and Kaylie came down from upstairs, where they often napped in one of the guest bedrooms, and wandered around, looking for attention from all of us. George, eyes half-closed but watchful, sat with his feet tucked under him beside Maggie. Poppy, Caesar, and Cato crawled all over Ben, wanting to play and, when he wouldn't cooperate, attacked Nicky, who was used to kittens clinging to his thick fur.

I had begun to think that Shaz would never emerge from her hiding place when she did just that, edging out an inch at a time from the end of the couch. She crept to the corner of the couch and peered with big, round, blue eyes at Maggie. We all, including the animals, sat perfectly still and watched her.

"Come here, kitten, I don't bite," Maggie said. "How old is she, Holly?"

"I'd guess about three months."

"Her coloring is a bit like a Siamese," Ben said.

"She's not, though," I said. "If she was Siamese, her feet and legs would be dark, like her tail and ears."

Shaz trotted to Maggie's feet, floated up onto the couch and sat down in Maggie's lap, where she gazed around with a serene expression. Maggie began patting her, while George sat up straight, apparently trying to decide what he should do about this cheeky kitten. Kaylie, from the back of Ben's chair, growled but stayed put. I let go the breath I'd been holding. "I'm amazed. I thought she was frightened of you."

Maggie went on stroking Shaz. "Her fur is wonderful. Very thick and soft and silky. She'll need a lot of grooming. Fur this thick will quickly tangle into mats."

"She looks like a Ragdoll," Ben said. Not only did he have dozens of reference books about cats in his den, all of which he'd read at least twice, he also subscribed to *Cat Fancy*. "If I'm right, her fur won't tangle."

"I think you're stuck with her, Maggie." I crossed my fingers. "It's obvious she's picked you as her slave."

"I'm not a cat's slave."

I smiled. "No?"

"I feed and groom cats and empty litter boxes. I even provide petting and open doors on demand, but I am not a slave."

"You're splitting hairs, mother," Ben teased.

"You forget I taught school. I like to use language accurately." Maggie went on petting Shaz. "You pretty little girl, you're purring!"

I glanced at Ben, but he didn't seem upset. Of course, Maggie hadn't yet said she'd take the kitten, but I could tell by her face that she was a goner. "I've already made an appointment to get Shaz examined and see if she needs shots, so you don't need to worry about that."

"And I'll do the application to the trustees for the cottage this weekend," Ben said. "Holly, they don't need detailed plans, do they?"

"No, just what kind of building it will be, how big it is and what materials you're going to use. There's lots of time; we're not meeting until the twentieth."

"That's barely two weeks away."

"I'd say that time flies if it wasn't such a cliché," Maggie said, "but the phrase certainly

describes the process succinctly." She put Shaz on the couch and rose. "Give me a lift home, would you, Benjamin, please?"

The kitten jumped down and headed into the hall as if she had a definite destination in mind.

A moment later, when I went into my den to send a couple of emails, I discovered that Shaz had indeed known where she was going. The small blue bowl that held my paper clips was empty and Shaz was trying to bury a large pink clip under the pad my chair sat on. I could see the gleam of a silver clip among the leaves of my gloxinia.

"Shaz, you are not allowed to steal my paper clips."

"Is that who's doing it?" Ben stood in the doorway. "I saw a blue one in George's water dish as I was heading out the door. Do you know where the car keys are? Maggie's in a hurry to get home."

"Ask Shaz."

"Get serious, Holly."

I patted my jeans pocket. "Oh, here they are. Sorry, I forgot to put them back on the rack when we came in."

Huff.



I moved Shaz's food and water dishes to the kitchen, where the rest of the gang ate. Over the next couple of weeks, she spent a lot of time playing with the three teenagers and Ming. George thought kittens were undesirable pests and Kaylie, dreaming up schemes to usurp George's throne, was too busy to bother with anything as trivial as a playful kitten. But every time a stranger came into the house, Shaz vanished under the couch and wouldn't come out until the person had left.

"Do you think she's frightened?" I asked Ben.

He shook his head. "She's not afraid of anything else on two legs. Except for Mr. Mighty."

Shaz certainly wasn't afraid of me, even when I scolded her for stealing paper clips. I finally got fed up with retrieving clips from all over the house and hid them in my desk drawer. Next day I found her chewing the leaves off my gloxinia and discovered she'd done the same to a few other plants. I put the paper clips back on the desk and peace reigned. That is, until George began complaining that when she dropped a clip into his water dish, she splashed water everywhere when she tried to hook it out.

The next thing Shaz taught us was that she didn't much like being picked up, though she'd climb on a lap or a shoulder when it was her own idea. She always purred when I knelt on the floor to pet her and let me stroke her cloud-soft tummy.

She fought against being put in the cat carrier and, when she wasn't mewling piteously, panted all the way to Mora Bay and Jerry's office.

"What a gorgeous kitten," he said, as he began poking and prodding. She shivered and struggled until I lost my grip on her, then leaped off the table and nearly made it under a cupboard before Jerry grabbed her. "She looks like she might be part Ragdoll."

"I think she is. She also seems to be terrified of the cat carrier. None of my crew like being in the carrier but they're not afraid."

"Where'd you get her?"

"Ming brought her home. She was filthy and starving, so either she was lost, or somebody abandoned her."

He handed me the kitten, who was still panting and shaking, while he prepared a vaccination shot. "She must have had a bad experience with a carrier. A dog might have barked or growled at her while she was in one and she'd have been terrified because she couldn't get away."

"I guess I'll never know. Oh, and is she a 'she'?"

"Yes," he said. "Didn't you look?"

"I did, but she's not old enough to have bumps so I wasn't sure." I told him that Maggie and Norma might adopt her. "She took to Maggie at once."

"That would be a good idea. Norma was heartbroken about those three cats of hers dying. Shaz is healthy, though she needs to put on a little weight."

"The way she's been eating, I don't think that will be a problem."

Jerry cuddled Shaz against his chest for a minute, in spite of her protests, then tucked her into the carrier. "Are you up for a game of bridge Thursday night?"

"Yes."

He gave me a questioning look. "You haven't even checked your calendar."

"Whatever is on it will have to be postponed. I've been spending far too many hours on the community plan and I need a break. Ben tells me I worry too much. Even Maggie has started saying that. But it's hard to deal with the frustrations sometimes."

"I'll let you trump one of my aces," Jerry promised. "That should make you feel better."

Shaz was quieter on the drive back to Holly Haven. I wondered if she sensed she was going home.

Nicky greeted me with furiously wagging tail as I got out of the car carrying his kitten.

"Yes, I brought her back again." I'd just set the carrier down in the kitchen and let Shaz out when the phone rang. It was Norma.

"I've decided not to take the kitten, Holly. Maggie and I have our hands full as it is and I really can't face worrying about another cat."

I was disappointed but when I told Ben, he was delighted. "I'm glad we get to keep her. Is it a 'her'?"

"Yes, she's a 'her.' And I don't know if we'll keep her for long. Norma doesn't want to take on another cat, but I can tell Maggie is in love with her."

"Well, until Maggie moves into the cottage," Ben said, "I'll tell Shaz to stay under cover, so you won't try to give her to anyone else."



On Saturday, May twentieth, I went off to the regular trustees' meeting at the Yellow Duck, carrying Ben's application for a building permit. A misty rain fell from uniformly gray skies, hardly a felicitous beginning to the Victoria Day long weekend.

"I hope this rain quits by tomorrow," Duff said, as he followed Joanna and me into the back room at the pub. "Otherwise the Rotary picnic on Monday will be washed out."

"I want to see the fireworks, too," I said. "I didn't make it last year." The other two settled down while I got the laptop up and running. "Shall we deal with old business first?"

"Sure," said Duff. "I talked to the Trust lawyer, and he said to sit tight on Trevor Brentwood's suit. He'll look into various statutes and case law, then let us know if we have anything to worry about."

"No point talking about it then," Joanna said. "Has Derek Jamison reported on the Perrys' trees yet?"

"No," Duff said. "What's that paper you're fussing with, Holly?"

"An application for a building permit from Ben and me." I handed them each a copy and they studied the details for a few minutes.

"There's no detailed plan here," Duff said. "Is this going to be a regular house?"

"Ben can't do the proper plan until he's talked to his mother. He wants to build the cottage for Maggie to live in. But I think it'll probably be a two-bedroom bungalow with a patio on the side facing the sea and a screened cat run in the back."

"More cats?" Duff asked. "Ben told me you have six of your own."

"Maggie will be looking after Norma Brentwood's cats a few months from now."

"Yes," Joanna said, "I heard about that. It's a pity; I was told she's a really nice lady."

I wondered how she'd heard, way over on Melfort Island, but I didn't bother asking. The inter-island gossip network was almost as efficient as Adriana's own.

"How many cats will be living with Maggie?" Duff asked.

"Four. She won't adopt any more because she's getting on in years herself." Duff seemed a bit obsessed with the number of cats on our land, perhaps because they made him nervous. At the post-election celebration at Holly Haven, I'd discovered he was terrified of Ming. It can be a little disconcerting to have a twenty-four-pound cat stare fixedly into your eyes, but my guess had been that Ming was simply trying to read Duff's mind.

"That's ten," Duff said. "Won't they produce kittens?"

"Of course not! They're all fixed." I decided to get even with Duff for all the weird facts he'd dumped on Ben or me over the years. "Did you know that a cat's nose pad is as unique as a human fingerprint? No two nose prints are identical."

"That's amazing," he said. "I thought they'd be all alike."

"Each cat is a unique individual," I said, "just like humans."

"This is all very interesting," Joanna said, "but we're way off the subject. I'm ready to vote on your application, Holly. How about you, Duff?"

"I'd like to discuss it with you for just a minute," he said. "Holly, will you leave the room, please? You're not allowed to vote on something that deals with your own property."

I went into the main pub, stood at one of the windows and watched raindrops dapple the water in the marina. Would Duff and Joanna find some reason to turn down Ben's application? I couldn't imagine why they would; Ben had been very thorough in his presentation, other than for a detailed plan of the cottage.

"Okay, Holly, you can come back in now." Joanna was holding the door open for me. "And stop worrying; we voted yes."

I thanked them, recorded the motion and vote and we sorted out a few snags that had come up in the community plan. By noon we were done. "Are we going for a beer and hamburger or do you two want to get on with your long weekend?"

"What long weekend?" Duff said. "I'm working today. You can't shut down a grocery store just because it's a long weekend."

In the pub, he pulled out chairs for Joanna and me. "Did you ladies know there are about one trillion bacteria on each of your feet?"



IV -- Party Pooper

May twenty-seventh dawned warm and sunny for Ben's sixtieth birthday. When I'd first started planning his party, I was glad it fell on a Saturday because we could celebrate the actual day instead of defaulting to the nearest weekend. Now that he knew about the party – and didn't want it – my only joy was in the fact it would soon be over. However, Maggie and Norma had done a fine job on the menu, and I'd done my duty in the grocery and liquor stores, hiding most of the goodies under the upstairs guest room beds. The party was going to happen whether Ben liked it or not.

When he came in from the greenhouse for midmorning coffee and saw the rack of cheese and onion tarts cooling on the counter, he said, "What time are people coming to this shindig of yours?"

"Any time after three. And it's your shindig, not mine."

"Ha. I hope you all have a good time."

"Ben, you can't refuse to attend your own birthday party."

"Why not? I wasn't invited. You just assumed I'd want one and you were wrong. I don't have to do anything I don't want to do."

He sounded exactly like his mother. Such statements from a woman of eighty-one were admirable and could even be cute. From a sixty-year-old man with a sulky look on his face, they were just annoying. "But you've always liked parties."

"I don't like this one."

"Ben, sixty is just a number. Nobody cares what it is."

He gave me a triumphant look over the rim of his mug. "If that's true, then what's all this fuss about?"

"It's the custom. People have parties on major birthdays."

"Sixty is not a major birthday."

"Yes, it is," I said. "Kidnappers won't be interested in you now."

Ben stared at me. "Get real! Kidnappers are only interested in money, and we don't have any." He poured himself another coffee and reached for a cheese and onion tart.

I slapped his hand away. "Oh, no, you don't! These are for the party. If you're not attending, you don't get any."

"Then I'll eat some tonight when the party's over."

"The leftovers will go home with Maggie and Norma. Duff might appreciate some as well."

Ben drank his coffee, grabbed a tart when he thought I wasn't looking and hurried back to the greenhouse. I vacuumed carpets and polished glasses, but my heart wasn't in it. What if Ben was serious about not showing up for the party? I couldn't see any point lighting candles on the birthday cake if he wasn't there to blow them out. Our friends would miss the chance to tease him about being over the hill and feel slighted if he didn't show up to receive and exclaim over cards and gifts. The whole thing would bomb. I was ashamed of the birthday boy; he was a party pooper.

I was also getting angry. People would gossip about this for months, which meant I'd be apologizing for him even longer. Should I ask Maggie to talk to him? But once he got stubborn about something, he was worse than any cat about changing his mind. If either of us nagged him, he'd just dig his heels in that much harder. I went out to the kitchen and turned on the heat under some leftover minestrone. I didn't feel like eating but Ben would want lunch.

At twelve-thirty, he came in, trailing Nicky and the Siamese teenagers, Poppy, Caesar, and Cato. "The salad plants are thriving. I've got two boxes of lettuce and one of green onions to take to the grocery store."

"Oh! I forgot you were going to have lunch with Duff today."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "You forgot? But surely you set up this thing of me having lunch with Duff to sign a new contract. He's supposed to keep me talking until everybody arrives for the party, right?"

"Yes, I did set it up." I was so annoyed about his rudeness that I really had forgotten about the lunch with Duff. "So, are you going?"

"Sure. The contract is for real, and I need to sign it."

He changed and left, with a breezy "See you later. Much later!"

I turned off the minestrone and ate a cheese and onion tart. They were the best I'd ever made, and I was determined to keep Ben from having more unless he showed up to blow out his candles. For the next couple of hours, I crammed the living room with chairs and laid out party food on the kitchen counters, leaving space for the trays Maggie and Norma would be bringing. Whatever Ben did, at least the rest of us would have places to sit and food to eat.

I discovered, after coming downstairs with the last two chairs from the guest bedrooms, that we wouldn't have quite as much food as I'd planned. I went into the kitchen so quietly that I caught Nicky with his front feet on a kitchen chair, reaching for his sixth sausage roll.

"Darn you, dog! You know you're not allowed to do that." He scuttled into the mud room and stuck his head through the cat flap, desperate to escape a verbal mauling. I opened the human door for him. "Get out! Go herd chickens or something."

The cats were restless and paced back and forth, sniffing the multitude of food aromas in the kitchen and the new chairs in the living room. Always disapproving of any change in their routine, they were trying to understand all the strange and unusual happenings in their kingdom.

The first arrivals were Gareth, Sue, and Beanbag, announced by Nicky barking and leaping around their car. I hugged the humans, patted the Corgi, and left him outside to play with Nicky. "How was the drive?"

"The traffic was brutal," Gareth said, running a hand through his thinning blond hair. He looked a lot like Ben, but carried an extra seventy-five pounds because his working life was spent on a chair, delving into the mysteries of computers. "We almost missed the ferry. Where's my old man?"

"Out to lunch. In more ways than one."

Gareth took a small spicy sausage off one of the trays. "Why do you say that?"

"He says he's not coming to his party."

"But that's ridiculous," Sue said. She folded her tall, slim body onto a chair and petted George the Magnificent, who was annoyed by all the noise and disruption and wanted someone to atone for it. He'd missed his ruff this morning because Ben had been in too much of a snit to give him one, but I didn't have time to teach Sue how to get down on her knees and rub George's body all over. "Does he have a reason?"

"He says he doesn't think being sixty is worth celebrating and he wasn't invited, so he's not coming. I think the real problem is he doesn't want to admit he's that old. If he doesn't allow himself to be feted, he can pretend sixty hasn't happened."

"Head-in-sand syndrome," Sue said. "Just like a frightened cat that hides its head in your armpit. If it can't see the danger, obviously the danger can't see it." Sue was, to my delight, as much a cat person as a dog person.

"Ben's not a cat," I said, "but if he doesn't appear at his own party, I might just arrange for him to end up as cat food."

"Cheer up, Holly," Sue said, "he'll probably give in." She pulled a card out of her bag and handed it to me. "Here's the card I made for him." Sue taught art at a junior college. On the outside was a pen and ink cartoon of Ben, with vegetables growing out of various parts of his body, and inside were the words 'Happy Growing!'

"That's delightful," I said. "Are you parked in the driveway?"

"On the grass," Gareth said. "Do you want me to move the car?"

"No, that's fine. I just want Maggie to be able to pull up to the back door. Ben knows you two and Maggie will be here, but perhaps the other people who come will be a surprise. I asked them all to park in the neighbors' driveways. The Dyckmans, Traffords, Millers, and Cal Peterson will walk over, anyway."

"Who else did you ask?" Gareth speared another sausage.

"Rusty and Jean Bell from Victoria. Rusty was Ben's boss for years."

"I remember him," Gareth said. "Great guy, except for his mouth."

"What's wrong with his mouth?" Sue asked.

Gareth grinned. "After he's had two drinks, it never stops moving." He turned to me. "Anybody else I know?"

"I don't think so. I did ask Dave and Betsy, but Dave said he had too many operations booked to fly out from Moose Jaw." Dave was Ben's younger brother. "The rest are local, like the other two Adrianna trustees and a guy that's working for us, my editor at *The Adrianna Advocate*, and so on."

"The house will be bulging," Sue said. Shaz had hidden under the couch as soon as I opened the back door for Gareth and Sue. The rest of the cats had disappeared upstairs, out of the way. The rumble of a car engine and two dogs barking made George leap off Sue's lap and race upstairs after them. I could almost hear him thinking, "Enough is enough!"

A look out of the kitchen window confirmed that Maggie and Norma had arrived. "Gareth, could you give them a hand with the food, please?"

"Don't let Beanbag in here," Sue added. "If he sees a cat, he'll have a heart attack."

"Poor old mutt," I said. "I don't suppose he's ever going to recover from being ridden by a cat with long, sharp claws."

When we'd arranged the rest of the food on the kitchen counter, settled Maggie and Norma in the living room, and Sue had gone upstairs to the guest room to unpack, it was after three o'clock and I was kept busy running to the back door to let in more people. Kaylie decided it was a shame to miss out on all the attention available in the living room and had come downstairs again. She was parading around, looking queenly and allowing people to stroke her once or twice. I'd thought Shaz might emerge when she heard Maggie's voice, but she obviously preferred to stay under cover.

By the time it was three-thirty, everyone had arrived except for the birthday boy and Duff. Gareth poured drinks and Sue helped me put out plates of nibbles. I winced every time someone made a joke about Ben driving Bouncing Blue Betsy into the ditch because he'd celebrated too much at lunch or wondered if he'd had a flat tire. As the clock moved inexorably toward four, I did some wondering of my own, though not aloud. Could murdering Ben be classified as justifiable homicide?

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. "Gareth, give me a cigarette."

"Hey! I thought you quit at New Year's."

"I did," I said grimly. "Now I'm starting again." But before I could make my way to the front veranda, I heard the explosive sounds of Bouncing Blue Betsy roaring into our driveway. I handed Gareth's cigarette back to him and hurried out to the mud room, shushing people as I went.

Ben came in the back door, followed by Duff. "Where is everybody, Holly? I thought you invited a bunch of people."

"I phoned them all and canceled," I said, in my sweetest voice. "Gareth and Maggie decided to come anyway."

Ben looked disappointed. Then he peered into the kitchen. "Where did those cheese and onion tarts go?"

"They're on a tray in the living room." I turned to Duff. "Go ahead. If you're lucky, Gareth might have left you a couple."

Ben hung his keys on the rack and headed to the bedroom, removing his good jacket on the way. For one long moment I was afraid he was going to change into his grubbies, assuming nobody would see him but relatives, but he came out and continued down the hall. When he stepped into the living room, the roar of twenty-odd voices singing 'Happy Birthday' enveloped him. I waited for a moment before I joined them, regretting the cigarette I'd given back to Garth. Smoking still seemed like a darn good idea. Better than killing Ben, anyway.

A couple of hours later, when Ben had opened all his presents, laughed at the silly cards, and blown out the candles on his cake, the fuss had died down somewhat. I cornered Duff. "How did you talk him into coming back in time for the party?"

"I don't know. I'd just finished telling him that a sixty-year-old human has spent twenty years of his life in bed and three years eating, when he got a funny look on his face and said, 'I can live with that.'"

When the guests had either gone home or upstairs to bed and the cats had herded Ben and me into our bedroom, I asked Ben why learning he'd spent a third of his life sleeping had made him relent about the party.

For a moment he looked blank. "Oh! It wasn't what Duff said. It was that system of figuring out how old cats are in human years. You know, a cat at one year is equivalent to a human at twenty, and then you add four human years for every cat year."

"You're not making sense."

Ben buttoned his pajama top. "Well, I'd just explained to Duff how to calculate a cat's age. Then I thought about George being eleven, which means he'd be sixty if he was human, and I decided being eleven wasn't so bad. It'll be another four whole years before I'm twelve."



The following Saturday, Maggie came over to look at the rough plan Ben had drawn up for her cottage.

"You didn't bring Norma," I said, as Maggie came in the back door with Nicky nuzzling her hand and stirring up a breeze with his wagging tail.

"She had to take a painkiller this morning."

"Oh, dear. How bad is it?"

"Now, Holly, don't fuss." Maggie sat at the kitchen table. "She's had very little trouble until today, but this morning the pain was bad, so she took a pill. The pill made her sleepy, so she's having a nap with all the animals."

"Are you sorry Norma didn't want to adopt Shaz?"

Maggie smiled. "Yes, I am. I think Shaz was meant to be my cat."

"She will be, in time, and I think she'll be happy in the cottage. She goes outside very little, though perhaps she doesn't like Nicky and Ming following her around and lugging her back to the house every ten minutes. Perhaps she also remembers being lost and cold and hungry outside."

"She might. Anyway, don't worry about Norma. She's completely accepted the fact that her illness is fatal and she's content with it, even happy."

"Happy? I could understand if what she felt was resignation, but 'happy' seems too good to be true."

George jumped into Maggie's lap, causing Nicky to back away, well aware that his nose might suffer if he didn't make way for the King. "She is happy, though. She told me that she feels it's time for her to go and everything is working out right. She even said yesterday she'd stay long enough to enjoy carrots and potatoes out of the garden and then she was leaving."

"Wow!" I said. "I hope I can be that cool with dying when my turn comes."

"Enjoy every minute of your time now and then you'll be ready."

"That's a lot easier to say than do."

"I know it is," Maggie said. "I keep trying to be aware of every moment that passes, but I fail more than I succeed. I keep on telling myself to do it, though, hoping I'll discover the secret of living every single moment."

The back door slammed, and Ben came in. He leaned down to kiss Maggie's cheek, then poured himself a coffee instead of waiting for me to do it. I hadn't altogether forgiven him for his birthday performance and, like Nicky, he could sense the emotional weather well enough to avoid possible turbulence. He retrieved the cottage plan from his den and sat down beside his mother.

George, annoyed with all the chatter and activity, jumped down and stalked away. He'd barely reached the living room when Shaz woke up from her nap on one of the dining room chairs and took his place on Maggie's lap.

"Oh, you little precious!" Maggie patted the kitten. "You're my pretty girl, aren't you?"

"She certainly is," I said. "She doesn't like Ben or me picking her up, but I've noticed she lets you do it."

"Maybe it's because we both have blue eyes." Maggie went on stroking the kitten while she studied Ben's plan. "Benjamin, which side faces the ocean?"

"Here." He pointed. "The patio, living room, dining room, kitchen and the master bedroom face east."

"All right, so the guest bedroom, den, bath, and laundry room all face west. Isn't there any way for all the rooms to have a view of the sea?"

"If that's what you want," Ben grumbled, "I might as well buy a house trailer."

"No, no!" Maggie looked annoyed. "I don't want to live in a trailer."

"You couldn't anyway," I said. "The bylaws say no trailers except in a trailer park and that rule will stay the same in the official community plan."

"I could make it two stories," Ben said, "but you don't want stairs, do you?"

"No," Maggie said, "and two stories would make it look like a house, not a cottage. I like the idea of it being a cottage, but instead of having roses around the door, maybe I'll have an ivy-covered arbor framing the door."

Ben groaned. "Please don't. Ivy is nearly as invasive as blackberry vines, and I've got

enough trouble with those on two sides of the property."

"I suppose it will work the way it is. I'll be able to look at the ocean from the rooms I use most." Maggie nodded. "Yes, the layout is fine. But the master bedroom is too small."

"It's big enough for a single bed, a dresser and a chair," Ben said indignantly. "What more could you want?"

"I intend to buy a queen-size bed and a nice big armchair."

"What do you need a queen-size for?" Ben was beginning to sound irritable. "You're single."

"What about when I invite Cal to stay the night?" Maggie demanded.

Ben's face went beet-red and his mouth opened but nothing came out.

Maggie relented. "Benjamin, it's not just that. I happen to like a big bed. I like room to move around and spread out the newspaper in the morning. The cats and BJ will want to sleep with me, too. Maybe I should go for a king-size."

Ben recovered enough to say, "If I add another four feet on the south end of the house, will that do?"

She bent over the plan with a ruler, sketching in the furniture where she wanted it. "Make it six feet. There's nothing so luxurious as having a spacious bedroom, especially when you can prop yourself up with a cup of tea and the paper and glance out at the world whenever you feel like it."

"All right, another six feet. Consider it done." He began to roll up the plan.

"Wait a minute," Maggie said. "You haven't shown the screened cat run on that plan. I think it should go the full length of the house on the west side."

"The cat run doesn't need to go on the plan; it can be built afterward if you really want one," Ben said. "I'm assuming you want the cats to run around in the grass, so I won't have to put in footings for a floor."

"And climb trees," she said. "We're going to add six feet to the house. Does that mean we can include one of those poplars inside the pen?"

"I'll have to pace it off, but I think it's likely. Anything else you can think of?" I could tell by Ben's tone of voice that he was hoping she wouldn't come up with any more changes. And I knew, though perhaps Maggie didn't, that adding six feet to the length of the house would add significantly to the cost.

"Are the windows on the east side going to be floor to ceiling?" Maggie asked.

"Not quite," Ben said. "I was planning on two feet above the floor up to the ceiling. And sliding glass doors to the patio, of course. From the living room."

"Maybe those should be in the kitchen," Maggie said. "Oh dear, I can't decide."

"You can make that decision later," Ben said. "But I need to know by the time the subfloor is laid. That's when we'll start framing."

Maggie let Ben roll up the plan. "Perhaps you're right about having the sliding doors in the living room after all. It will be more convenient for guests. For me, too. If I'm working in the kitchen, I won't want people traipsing past me to get outside."

"The plan is fairly open," I said. "The way Ben's drawn it, there's only a low partition, like a narrow counter, between the dining and living room, and a wide counter with cupboards underneath on both sides, between the dining room and kitchen. Like one long room, with a bedroom closed off at the end."

"It sounds fine," Maggie said. "And now I'd better go home and see how Norma's doing." She put Shaz on the floor and the kitten went over to the fridge, hooked a large red paper clip from underneath and batted it under the stove, where I suspected there were dozens more. The

supply on my desk was getting so low I'd put them on my shopping list.

"Aren't you going to stay and visit your grandcats?" I said.

She shook her head. "Next time. Norma may not feel like cooking tonight, so I'd better take care of it."

"Do you want me to come over and weed the vegetable garden?" Ben asked.

"Not just yet," Maggie said. "We're doing all right so far. When the sun is shining, Norma spends all her time in the garden."

I walked out to the car with Maggie. "There's one thing worrying me about Norma's situation. Isn't she going to say goodbye to her grandsons?" She'd told me both young men had aced their exams and had summer jobs. In September, John would be working on his PhD in astronomy and Bruce would be in his last year of chemical engineering.

"We've talked about it," Maggie said, resting her hand on the car door handle, "and I think she probably will. At first, you know, she didn't want to tell anyone, and she still doesn't want to tell Trevor, but she's very fond of those two boys and they'll be hurt if she doesn't confide in them."

"Would they rat on her?"

"I don't know, dear. But I suppose that's why she's hesitating." Maggie gave me a shrewd look. "And I rather think saying goodbye to them will be the most difficult thing she has to do."

"Trevor probably won't care, one way or the other."

"I'm afraid you're right, Holly. But at least he can't get his hands on her land now."

When Maggie had rattled across the cattle guard and disappeared down the road, I went into my den and started more research on the community plan. We needed to get both it and the subsequent bylaw approved to make absolutely sure Trevor couldn't find a way to get his greedy fingers on the old-growth forest and the beach front that made Norma's house such a wonderful place to visit.



Going to bed at night was a fairly simple procedure as long as we did it when the cats started rounding us up and shooing us toward the king-size bed. It could have been complicated because so many bodies were involved, but we'd all laid claim to our own territory and trouble was rare. Nicky slept at the foot, his back braced against the footboard, with Ming and Kaylie sprawled on him or beside him. George slept on my pillow, often curled around the top of my head, and complained indignantly if I moved. Poppy, Caesar, and Cato slept in the middle of the bed, sometimes all in a heap, or else one on either side of us and one in the middle. Sometimes Shaz slept between Nicky's front paws but more often on the overstuffed armchair in the corner.

This night, George was more than ready to snuggle up when I'd finished my tea and put my book down. He paced around my pillow, tail waving, until I turned off the light, slid down under the covers and put my head down. He draped himself around it and heaved a satisfied sigh. Ben turned off his light and the teenagers rearranged themselves.

All was peaceful. For maybe five minutes.

"Meow!" It was Kaylie's voice and, surprisingly, it sounded like she was beside my waist instead of down around my feet.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Meow!" she said, into my ear this time.

Ben turned the light on. "What part of meow don't you get, Holly? You're supposed to

understand everything these cats say."

George growled. It was soft and low, but a growl nonetheless. I turned my head and saw Kaylie, about six inches from my face, staring at him.

"She's challenging him," I said. "She not only wants to boot him off the throne, but out of his favorite sleeping spot as well."

Kaylie meowed again, holding her position. George growled, louder this time.

"George," I said, "you have my permission to give her a good thumping but wait until I get my head out of the way. She has no business trying to usurp your territory. That's like declaring war."

Ben said, "The Sanskrit word for war means 'desire for more cows.' Do you suppose Kaylie wants more mice?"

I eased myself out of bed. "What are you doing with Sanskrit words? Shouldn't you be telling me something clever in Latin? If I remember correctly, that's the language they used in ancient Rome."

Ben was too busy watching the drama to answer. George rose to his feet, head forward, and went into a crouch, lips drawn back from his teeth. He started the deep growl-yowling cats do when they're thinking about killing one another. All the other cats were standing up now, looking worried.

Kaylie held her position for another second, then turned and scooted to the foot of the bed and tucked herself between Nicky's front paws. George's growl eased up, then stopped. I climbed back into bed and George curled up, grumbling a little.

"George, beat her up if she does that again. Otherwise, she'll just keep harassing you." Sometimes, the cats actually seemed to understand what I said to them. I hoped this was one of those times.

Ben turned out his light. "If he wants to keep his throne, he'll have to learn that she's not a kitten anymore, that she means business now."

"Tonight's episode should have got him out of the habit of thinking she's only playing."

"I agree," said Ben. "I bet he'd even beat me up if I tried to sleep on your pillow."

"He's not the only one."

Ben rolled over to face the other way and started snoring. Or pretending to.



V -- Showdown

Ben and Cal spent the next couple of days studying the cottage plan and working out what supplies they'd need. Ben spent two more days after that on the phone, costing materials and muttering to himself about inflation, outrageous prices and how we were going to end up destitute. When he was finished costing, he asked Cal to come over and double-check the list of materials and calculations.

On this last visit, Shaz decided Cal had been around enough to be accepted as part of the family. She came out from under the couch, trotted into the kitchen and batted her big blue eyes at him.

"Hey, this one's going to be a real looker." He reached down to scratch her head and Shaz flopped onto her back, exposing her soft tummy. "And a slut, too, aren't you, sugar?" He gently rubbed her tummy, and I could hear her purring from where I stood at the other end of the kitchen, peeling potatoes for supper.

"This cottage is going to cost more than I thought it would," Ben said, his head bent over his materials list. "I wish my mother wasn't insisting on a big bedroom."

Cal abandoned Shaz and snagged another ginger snap. "That first plan you drew up had it eight by ten feet. A room that size, you couldn't cuss a cat without getting fur in your mouth."

I'd been holding my breath, but Cal obviously had too much sense to say the bedroom had to be big enough to hold him as well as Maggie. Cal and Ben got along really well, but Ben couldn't seem to get used to the idea that his mother was sexually active. I didn't think it was her age that bothered him so much as some odd belief that mothers were somehow exempt from lust. Though if that's what he thought, it might be fun to ask how he explained his own existence.

Shaz dropped a big silver paper clip at Cal's feet. He threw it into the hall and Shaz raced after it. He looked amazed when she brought it back and dropped it by his feet. "Never thought I'd see a cat play fetch." He threw the clip for her again and looked at me. "Is this the kitten Maggie likes so much?"

"She's the one." I smiled. "It's obvious she likes you, or she'd still be under cover."

"Cal, are you okay to start as soon as I get the go-ahead from the bank?" Ben asked.

"Don't see why not," Cal said. "I sheared the goats a couple weeks ago and the three kids are doing good."

Ben rolled up the plan. "All right. I can't put in full days because I've got the garden and the greenhouse to look after."

"And the deer and squirrels to feed," I said, straight-faced.

Ben gave me a suspicious look, then his face cleared. He'd never believe I could tease him about the essential task of feeding his flock, just as he'd never believe the luxuriant grass and fresh leaves of June would keep his deer from starving or that the squirrels could get along on last year's pine and fir cones.

"You could hire another carpenter if you get too busy in the garden," I said.

Ben shook his head. "No way. Cal and I can do it."

Cal threw the paper clip for Shaz for about the tenth time. "This kitten never quits. I might have to take off a day now and then to take care of other jobs. You know, stuff like plugged toilets and busted wiring."

"Doesn't matter," said my intrepid husband. "I can manage. I could probably build the whole thing myself, but it would take too long."



By the time I had to attend the June twentieth trustee meeting, we were seriously in hock to the bank and Ben and Cal had poured the footings and completed the subfloor. As I bumped over the cattle guard and headed toward Mora Bay, I realized I was still ambivalent about the cottage. I liked having the whole five acres to ourselves and I hated owing money to the bank. But I also wanted Maggie to have a home of her own. In the cottage, she'd be near enough for us to easily look after when she started getting frail.

Derek Jamison joined our meeting in the back room of the Yellow Duck. "How did you make out with Deanna and Peter Perry?" Duff asked.

Derek arranged his lanky six foot four on a chair and unfolded a large map. "I've marked the trees it's okay for them to harvest." He slid the map across to Duff and Joanna. His curly black hair and smooth, tanned skin made him look like an overgrown teenager, but I knew he was twenty-four and would graduate as an ecologist in January.

"Did you go over this with the Perrys?" Joanna said.

Derek nodded. "They're not happy. I only approved about half of what they want to take down."

"Which is fine," Joanna said. "Enough to keep them quiet, one hopes, without making the property into a desert. What reasons did you give them for not approving all the trees?"

"Erosion, for one," Derek said. "Trees have root systems that keep the soil stable. If you were to take all those trees down, the water runoff from winter rains would start washing away the soil and nibbling at the cliff edge. Give it a few years and the edge might give way under somebody's weight."

"Excellent!" Joanna said. "Anything else?"

"Oh, I gave them a lot of details about how some trees need others of the species for support and that taking out as many as they wanted would let the prevailing southwest winds sweep right across the property. I told them the customers wouldn't like that much, especially if an RV got blown over. Could mean insurance claims and lawsuits. Not to mention somebody getting hurt."

"You're a politically savvy young man," Duff said.

"Not really," Derek said. "I just figure trees need to be protected from human predation. And everything I told them is true."

"What I meant," Duff said, "was that you gave them reasons; you didn't just act like a bureaucrat."

Derek grinned. "Can't do that till I get my degree and a full-time government job."

"I'll phone the Perrys and be sympathetic. I also need to remind them that whoever they hire to fell the trees has to stick to the ones you've approved." Duff folded the map. "Now, what about the other things you're doing for the official community plan?"

"I'm almost done," Derek said. "I've finished the topographical map and another that shows different ecosystems, plus I've made lists of the flora and fauna in each one."

"Does that include the trees?" I asked.

"Yes, it does, along with estimates of how much forest could be harvested." Derek opened his briefcase and passed copies of his maps and lists to each of us. "What I'm doing now is working out what should be done for protection of each area and making suggestions for parklands and trails."

"Have you considered the Brentwood property?" I pointed to it on the Adriana land survey map in front of me.

Derek peered at the map. "Ah, yes, that piece. I understand it belongs to the Islands Trust now. The twenty acres of old-growth forest should be preserved as park, along with a strip around Gordon Bay to where it abuts the Perrys' property."

"What about the cleared meadows, the old farmland? Norma Brentwood wants the whole hundred and sixty acres to be park."

Joanna shook her head. "That should be classed as farmland. Every year we lose too much good agricultural land to residential use. It's a crime to build houses on land that will grow potatoes or grain. And I don't think we need all that acreage to be park."

"Is it actually good agricultural land?" I asked. "I hear what you're saying, Joanna, but Norma did give the place to The Islands Trust on the basis that it would all be kept as parkland."

"It would be fine for grazing," Joanna said. "I had a look at it the other day. Or to grow potatoes. You wouldn't want to plant wheat there, but it would grow forage crops."

"This question comes under the heading of development policies," Duff said. "Which I think we're ready to do. Holly's done a great job of studying different Official Community Plans and combining points from each of them into a draft plan for Adriana."

Joanna nodded. "I agree. I have a few nits to pick, Holly, which I'll email to you, but I think we're ready to get down to the decisions on zoning for each area."

"If you don't need me anymore, I'll get back to work." Derek rose.

"When we've roughed out the general zoning," Duff said, "we'll need to consult with you and see if anything needs changing."

Derek left and the three of us discussed zoning for a while. We'd all done a lot of driving and walking around the island and, in the main, agreed on the designation of most properties. Not Norma's, though. Joanna wouldn't budge from her position that a hundred and twenty acres of it should be classified as agricultural.

"Let me talk to Norma," I said to her. "When I ran for election, I promised her I'd make sure it all became a park."

"I won't change my mind. Not on that point."

"Well, Duff, if Joanna and I remain on opposite sides of the fence, that leaves you with all the power."

"Right now, I feel totally powerless. But that's likely due to lack of beer and food." Duff pulled a calendar out of his briefcase. "Talk to Norma first, Holly, and let's have a special meeting with Derek on the thirtieth and see if we can finalize the draft plan. We've got a lot of consulting to do with a lot of people before we're ready for a public hearing."

Joanna sighed. "There will be tongues flapping for weeks and weeks."

"Did you know," Duff said, "that some hummingbirds' wings flap at a rate of nearly a hundred beats per second?"



The following Saturday, while Ben and Cal did the rough plumbing at the cottage so they'd be ready for the backhoe that was coming the following week to dig for the septic tank and field, I went over to Gordon Bay to visit Norma and Maggie. BJ bounced down the front steps, wriggling all over in anticipation of some stroking and it was nearly a minute before he had calmed down enough to lead me to the door.

My mother-in-law and Norma were both looking relaxed. "I'd offer you coffee, Holly," Maggie said, "but coffee doesn't agree with Norma's system now, so we're drinking green tea."

"Green tea is great." I settled into an overstuffed chair. "I drink too much coffee anyway." After Maggie handed me a mug of tea, I told Norma about the argument over her property in the last trustee meeting. "Before we meet again, I need to know if you have strong feelings about it all being parkland."

Norma stroked Blue Eyes, the ginger tabby, for a moment. "I do have strong feelings about this land. I was born in this house and I've lived here all my life. I'd like all of it to be a park, but perhaps I'm being unrealistic. Holly, if the meadows are designated as agricultural, can they ever be subdivided for residences?"

"No. Agricultural means exactly that. Basically, cows or crops."

"All right," she said, "I'm willing to go along with what Joanna wants. Farming is such a gamble that I doubt if those meadows will ever be plowed up. So, in effect, they will be part of the park. If cows or horses graze there, that will be fine, too."

"Thanks, Norma, I'll tell her. We're having a special meeting on the thirtieth to try and hurry this community plan into being."

"Norma," Maggie said, "tell Holly about BJ's new trick."

Norma smiled. "That's because I have a new trick, too. After Maggie and I have breakfast, I usually go back to bed with a book and read for an hour. BJ loves it; he snuggles up with me and sleeps. But this morning, I decided to have a shower instead of going back to bed."

"I called the dog," Maggie said, "and told him it was time to go outside for a widdle. He came down the hall, saw Norma at the bathroom door and scuttled back to bed. I went and got him and headed for the front door."

"When BJ saw that I wasn't coming with him," Norma said, "he scooted underneath my long nightie, in between my feet."

"He wouldn't come out," Maggie said. "I think he hoped that if he couldn't see me, I couldn't see him. By that time Norma was laughing so hard she could barely stand up."

I was laughing, too, as I pictured the scene. "How did you get him to go out?"

"I played a trick of my own," Maggie smiled. "I got his leash and said 'car' to him. He loves going in the car, so he went outside willingly. I don't know if he'll ever forgive me."

"He'll have forgotten about it by tomorrow," I said. "How's the garden coming along? I meant to go around the back and have a look, but BJ distracted me."

"Growing fast, with all the warm, sunny weather we've had lately." Maggie poured me another mug of tea. "I'll have to ask Benjamin to bring his cultivator over and weed between the rows."

"The sunshine has been wonderful," I said. "June can be such a wet month. It's been great for Ben and Cal, too. They'll start putting up the wall studs on Monday." Then I regretted what I'd said. Would it bother Norma to have the cottage mentioned, to know that she'd never see it finished?

"I want to come and see it when the walls are up and the roof is on," Norma said. "That way I can imagine Maggie and my babies living there, close to you and Ben."

Tears prickled my eyes as I realized that two of Norma's six months had already gone. Why did time have to disappear so quickly? "I'll phone as soon as it gets to that point. Did Maggie tell you about the cat run?"

Norma nodded. "It's a good idea. That will prevent them trying to find their way back here." She poured herself more tea from the pot on the end table beside her. "The thought of leaving my cats and BJ is hard for me, harder than leaving people behind. I guess it's because they need me."

"You know they'll be in good hands," I said.

"I know, and I'm enormously grateful. Still..."

I didn't know how to answer and luckily Doran chose that moment to come flying in through the cat door in the kitchen, race into the living room and land heavily in my lap. "You're very friendly today, Mr. Bad Boy."

He flopped over on his back and purred loudly while I rubbed his tummy and scratched his neck under its heavy ruff of fur. Then I realized that Smoke had followed him in and was sitting at my feet, doing his silent meow in greeting and, no doubt, looking for some attention, too.

"Okay, Doran, that's enough for now." I put him on the floor. He huffed, turned, and smacked me hard on the ankle. "Ouch!"

"You're not allowed to leave him to his own devices until he says you can." Maggie grinned. "The only time you may put him down is when he demands it."

"Well, pardon me!" I picked him up again. However, he wouldn't forgive the insult. He jumped down and turned his back on me. I took the opportunity to lean down and cuddle Smoke. As I straightened up, I heard a car engine.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked. "If so, I'll get out of your hair. I need to do some driving around the island while I think about property uses."

"For heaven's sake!" Maggie turned away from the front window. "It's Trevor." She looked at Norma. "Do you want to escape into the bedroom?"

Norma shook her head. "No. If there's going to be a showdown, I'd rather get it over with now, while I have you two here."

Trevor rapped at the door and walked in without waiting for an invitation. There was something different about him, but I couldn't figure out what it was. His casual slacks and open-necked shirt didn't make him look any less pompous or full of himself. I scolded myself for giving free rein to prejudice. Then remembered that he'd tried to get his mother committed so he could grab her land and decided I was more than justified. It occurred to me, too, that he was rude for simply walking in. His mother was not the only person living in the house now.

"Hello, mother." Trevor turned and saw me. "Oh, you're here." If he were a cat, his tail would have been fluffed out to twice its size.

"Yes, she is, and she's staying," Norma said.

I thought about Trevor suing me for exerting pernicious influence on his mother, and decided that, if I were a cat, I'd scratch his eyes out.

"I brought Tanya over to the island to visit Deanna and Peter," Trevor said, "and while I was here, I decided to ask if you're considering settling out of court. My lawyer hasn't received any notification that you're prepared to defend against my suit."

"Why should I settle?" asked Norma. "You don't have a hope in hell of winning."

My mouth fell open. Norma never used bad language. Trevor apparently felt the same way, for he stared at her. He started to say something, then stopped and stepped closer to her. "You're not looking well. Your skin is yellow and you've lost weight. Have you seen your doctor?"

"Oh, yes. There's nothing he can do."

"I don't believe it." Trevor was frowning. "These hick doctors are always years out of date."

"Not this one," Norma said. "He only just became an MD. He took over from my old doctor a few months ago."

"Then he's inexperienced," Trevor said. "What does he say is wrong with you?"

"Cancer of the pancreas." Norma took the last sip of her tea. "I've seen the lab reports, so I know it's true. And it's inoperable."

Trevor sat down, unasked, and adjusted his trousers to preserve the crease. "I'll go and see

him myself. I doubt very much he knows what he's doing." He leaned forward. "I think you'd better come back to Victoria with me. I'll send you to some specialists who will tell you the truth and take care of you."

"I trust Dr. Giles," Norma said. "And it was the lab in Victoria that did the tests. I suppose your specialists would use the same one."

Trevor looked at Maggie. "I'm trying to see that my mother gets proper care," he said. "Surely you can see that. Don't you agree she should come with me?"

"It's none of my business. In my opinion, Norma should do whatever she wants to do."

Trevor turned back to Norma. "Tell me, at least, that you're taking appropriate treatment."

"If you mean chemotherapy and radiation," Norma said, "I don't think it's appropriate and I've refused it."

Trevor looked astonished. "But it could save your life!"

"For how long?" Norma said. "From what Dr. Giles said to me and what I've read, pancreatic cancer is fatal. What's the point of suffering the knife and your poison and drugs if I'm going to die anyway?"

"You can't do that," Trevor said. "When your doctor prescribes therapy, you must take it."

"My body belongs to me, not to any doctor. I have the right to decide what's going to be done to it."

"You're being very foolish." Trevor rose and paced across the room. "You know nothing about illness or treatment. Doctors are the experts in health care, and you absolutely must listen to them. At the very least, chemotherapy and radiation could prolong your life."

"But at what cost?" I could see that Norma was angry. Pulsing blood lent a pink glow to her yellow skin. "What's the point of living longer if I'm going to spend that time being sick?"

"Don't be silly, mother. We have some excellent anti-nausea drugs available now. What could be more important than prolonging your life?"

"Dying a good death." Norma paused for a second. "It's time for me to go, Trevor. I can feel it. Maybe a heart attack would have been easier, but at least this way I have time to arrange my affairs and say my goodbyes."

"You're being negative," Trevor snapped. He stalked to the front door and turned to face Norma, scowling. "I'm going to see your Dr. Giles and tell him what I think. I will also instruct him to make sure you get appropriate treatment."

I wondered if Dr. Giles would be diplomatic or tell Trevor to get stuffed.

"You can tell him anything you like," Norma said, "but I won't change my mind." As Trevor put his hand on the doorknob, she added, "Why do you care, anyway? The last I heard, you were suing me."

His knuckles tightened on the knob. "It seems to be the only way to get you to listen to reason. It certainly doesn't alter the fact that you're my mother and I love you." He opened the door and marched out.

He'd said 'I love you' as though he'd been taught how to say the words but had no idea what they meant. From the window, I watched him stumble on the last step and recover himself, one hand going up to his hair. Then he climbed into a Mercedes-Benz convertible. It was a silvery sand color and, before he pulled away, I saw the chrome insignia, 'SL 500.' "I could swear he looks different from the last time I saw him."

I turned to Norma and was surprised to see her smiling. "Yes, he's wearing a rug."

Both Maggie and I began to laugh, perhaps as much out of relief that he'd gone as at his vanity. I patted one of Norma's hands. "I'm so glad you stuck to your guns."

"Me, too," she said. "But I expected this, sooner or later, just as I expected him to pretend that he cares what happens to me. If he can soften me up that way, he probably thinks I'll cave in and help him try to get the property back from the Islands Trust. If I'm dead, of course, I can't do a thing for him."

Maggie said, "I seem to remember you telling me that Trevor has always been like this."

Norma nodded. "He gets worse as he gets older, too." She put Blue Eyes on the floor and rose. "I told Dr. Giles what Trevor is like. I also told him that I was certified as sane by those two psychiatrists Trevor hired to try and get me judged as incompetent. So he knows the score."

"Do you think Trevor is a sociopath?" Maggie asked.

"I don't know what a sociopath is," Norma said, "but if it means somebody who doesn't care about anybody but himself, then that describes him well enough." She stopped in the hallway. "That session tired me out. I'm going to have a nap." BJ raced ahead of her into the bedroom, the three cats following sedately behind.

When Norma's door had closed, Maggie said, "I'm lucky to have two normal, decent boys as sons. I guess you're right, Holly, Trevor should have been drowned at birth. I'm grateful that Norma has her beloved garden and her animals. And many good friends."

"I'm sure she'd agree that she's blessed in those ways. But it must be a constant ache to have her only child turn out to be such a cold, selfish..."

"I can fill in that blank, Holly." Maggie smiled. "One good thing might come out of this. I think Norma will phone her grandsons now and ask them to come for a visit before she goes."

"I suspect Trevor will get to them before she does. He may try to get the boys on his side so they'll talk her into doing what he wants."

"You worry too much, Holly. At this point, nobody is likely to talk Norma into anything." Maggie came outside with me, and we stood for a moment, watching small wavelets caress the sand around Gordon Bay. "I guess you know that Norma left me the animals in her will."

"No, I didn't. I assumed you offered to take them."

"I did," Maggie said, "but Norma wanted to make it formal. She left everything else to Trevor and wanted to be sure there was no misunderstanding. He thinks animals are a waste of time and money, so he'd probably euthanize or abandon them."

"The idea of euthanizing him is very appealing."

Maggie ignored that. "Holly, I have a new idea. Since I'm going to be looking after Norma's three cats and BJ, perhaps I should go the whole way and start an animal shelter."

"That would make Ben stop dragging his feet about the cat run. He may be channeling St. Francis of Assisi, but I bet he'd be loyal to George and his subjects."

"Don't worry, Holly. If there are needy animals to consider, the St. Francis part of his character will take command."



VI -- Flying on One Wing

By the following Thursday, Maggie's cottage was beginning to actually look like a cottage. The framing was done, and Cal and Ben were nailing plywood sheets on the roof. When they came in for morning coffee, Cal bemoaned the fact that Ben had bought ordinary asphalt shingles.

"Sure would have been nice to use cedar shakes like the ones on my place," he said. "They make a house look more rustic." He sat down and took a shortbread cookie while I was pouring the coffee. I'd never seen a house more rustic than Cal's. It was built of logs and cedar shakes so old and weathered they were dark gray. The house looked as if it had grown out of the ground, like the trees that surrounded it. Funny little Angora goats, rectangular chunks of wool with two horns sticking out the top and four legs sticking out the bottom, wandered around the yard. Altogether, the place looked like it had been dropped there from a book of fairy stories.

"We talked about that before," Ben said. "If one of us had a dead cedar tree, I guess we could take time to split shakes, but we don't. And they're too expensive to buy."

"At least the asphalt shingles are a nice light green," I said. "That will blend in well with the trees."

"Yeah." Cal seemed unimpressed. He ate another cookie.

"How far up the roof have you done?" The special trustee meeting was the next day and I'd been too busy preparing for that to walk over to the cottage and admire their progress.

"About five feet on the east side," Ben said, waving his hand to demonstrate. Ever vigilant for such opportunities, Nicky snatched the half-eaten cookie out of Ben's hand and gulped it. "Bad dog," Ben said, but without much conviction.

"Those interlocking shingles are easy to handle," Cal said, "but it takes a knack just the same. Figure we'll be pretty fast by the time we get the whole roof done."

"Maybe the two of you should start a construction company to make use of all this experience you're getting."

They spent the next ten minutes telling me why that was a bad idea while I politely listened and wished I hadn't tried to tease them. Between the cottage and the garden, Ben had been working sixteen-hour days and his sense of humor was suffering. I was glad to see them heading out the back door.

I cleared away the coffee things and decided I could take five minutes to enjoy the morning from the kitchen sundeck. The sun was already hot, and the early morning dew had evaporated but everything looked green and fresh. Robins hopped around in the grass, looking for worms, and squirrels chased one another across the greenhouse roof. I could see Ben's and Cal's heads, shaded by baseball caps, on the cottage roof and hear their hammers echoing each other.

"Meow!" George the Magnificent, paws still damp from walking in wet grass where the sun had not yet reached, demanded my attention.

I picked him up and cuddled him for a moment. He butted my chin with his head and purred, then demanded to be set back on his royal feet. "All right, go have your morning nap. I'll check on your Nemesis."

But peace reigned in the living room. Ming and Shaz batted paper clips around while Kaylie sat like the Sphinx on the couch and watched disdainfully. I knew that Cato, Caesar, and Poppy would be outside somewhere, terrorizing the wildlife. I drew the drapes on the south windows to keep the heat at bay and went back to my den to slave over the community plan.

The rest of the morning flashed by all too quickly. I was in the kitchen, making salmon salad sandwiches and up to my ankles in extremely vocal cats demanding their share of the catch, when I heard what sounded like a scream.

An eagle? But no, it had been too prolonged. I hurried to the sundeck and looked toward the cottage. Cal was running toward me.

"Holly! Ben's hurt!"

For just a moment fear immobilized me. "How bad is it?"

"Don't know." Cal wiped the sweat off his face with a large navy-blue handkerchief. "Think he broke an arm."

He followed me into the house, where I scrabbled for tape. "Cal, have you got anything on the building site that would do for a splint?"

"No."

I grabbed a couple of wooden rulers out of my desk drawer, and we hurried over to the cottage. Ben was half-lying against a stack of plywood sheets, his face white, supporting his right arm with his left. Cal gently pulled him upright.

"Hurts like hell," Ben groaned as Cal and I fumbled with the splints and finally got them taped in place. "That's better. Not much, though."

"Think you can stand?" Cal asked.

"Don't know. Everything hurts." But he shifted to his knees and Cal hauled him upright. "Legs work okay, I guess."

"Should I call the ambulance?" I said, "or can you sit in the car?" I wanted to get him to the hospital instantly and the car would be faster than waiting for the ambulance.

"I'll go in the car," he said.

Cal and I, one on either side, walked him to the car port. "What happened?"

"He lost his footing on the roof and slid down," Cal said, "then fell against that stack of plywood. I figure that's what busted his arm." He opened the Chevy's passenger door to help Ben in.

I hurried into the house for my keys. When I came back, I said to Cal, "Phone Dr. Giles, would you? Tell him what happened and ask if he can meet us at the hospital. And do something with the salmon on the kitchen counter before those cats eat it all. Oh, and if you go home, put Nicky in the house so he doesn't wander off."

As I backed out, Cal said, "Yeah, I know."

The drive to Mora Bay was an exercise in frustration. I wanted to hurry but, every time I hit a bump, Ben yelped. By the time we were halfway to town, I realized I'd better apologize to Cal for giving him orders. He'd looked after our house and animals often enough that he knew the score.

At the hospital, Dr. Giles, young, blond, and dressed in sweatshirt and jeans, helped Ben out of the car. "Glad to see you put a splint on," he said. "If the bone's broken, any movement could sever blood vessels and cause more tissue damage."

"It's broken all right." Ben's words were a cross between a snarl and a moan.

Dr. Giles led him away to be X-rayed. It was a relief to see Ben's color was better, but now I was beginning to react to the shock and fear. I wanted a cigarette worse than I had the whole time I was quitting. I decided it was a good thing my hands were shaking too much to hang onto one. An hour in the waiting room with year-old movie magazines calmed me down to the point where I was more interested in those salmon sandwiches I'd left behind than in having a cigarette.

Dr. Giles called me into the treatment room where he was putting a professional splint on Ben's arm with gauze and elastic wrap. "Ben's lucky. It's a simple closed fracture of the radius and it should heal up without complications."

"Are there other injuries?" I asked.

"Doc says I'm just bruised," Ben said, "but I feel like somebody went at me with a baseball bat."

"You're going to be uncomfortable until the bruises settle down. I'm immobilizing the arm to hold the bones in position and also the elbow and wrist, for the same reason. Bone healing is a natural process and takes some time, so you'll have to be patient."

"Ha ha," Ben said. "Patient. Very clever. Why aren't you putting a cast on it?"

"Because fractures swell. When that happens, there's a buildup of pressure under the cast. Which means more pain and possible damage to the tissues around the bone."

"So, when do I get a cast?" Ben asked. "I need to get back to work."

"In a week, if everything looks good." Dr. Giles gave me a sympathetic glance over the top of Ben's head as he put the final touches on the elastic wrap. "And you're not going to be working with the cast on either, if you want the arm to heal properly. In fact, for the next twenty-four hours – seventy-two would be better – I want you to rest and elevate the arm well above your heart. That will reduce the pain and minimize swelling."

Ben glowered. "I haven't got time for this kind of thing. I'm building a house and running a market garden."

"Are you left-handed or right-handed?" Dr. Giles asked.

"Right-handed."

"Then, since it's your right arm that's immobilized, spend your time figuring out how you're going to brush your teeth with your left hand," Dr. Giles said. "I'd suggest getting other people to do your work for the next several weeks."

"But..."

"You can supervise," I said. "Cal will work on the cottage. I'll do some of the gardening."

Ben moaned. But this time I reckoned it was emotional rather than physical pain. He didn't want me and my incurable black thumb messing around in his greenhouse or garden and making his plants die. He raged and grumbled the whole five miles of twisty gravel road that wound through tiny farms and cedar forests to Holly Haven. "This is ruining all my plans!"

"Well, if you're going to be careless and fall off a roof, what do you expect?"

For the last half mile, he treated me to a dark, brooding silence. When I parked in the car port, he managed to unbuckle the seat belt and open the door with his left hand and limped off toward the cottage, radiating outrage.

"What about elevating your arm?" I yelled. He didn't even look around.



The next day, Friday, was June thirtieth, leading into the Canada Day long weekend and the traffic was twice as busy as usual. I'd headed for town and the trustees' meeting early so I could stop and buy painkillers for Ben. I wondered if Dr. Giles would prescribe tranquilizers. I wanted to stuff some down Ben's throat. Or my own. If he kept on moaning the way he had for the last eighteen hours, I'd have a hard time not strangling him.

The complaints were endless. He needed help to put his clothes on. It was awkward brushing his teeth and combing his hair with his left hand. He couldn't tie his shoes. He couldn't have a

shower. He couldn't cut up his dinner or aim his fork with his left hand so as to find his mouth. His arm hurt. His bones ached. The cats jumped on his lap and jarred his broken arm.

Earlier I'd helped carry food out to the meadow for the deer and turned on the garden sprinklers. Then Ben discovered he couldn't fill the bird feeders with only one hand and erupted again.

"I don't have time for this! That doctor better fix this arm so I can use it!"

"Ben, he said it takes time to heal. He can't wave a magic wand and do it instantly. You'll just have to learn to ask other people for help."

"I don't need help," he snarled. "What I need is for this arm to get back to normal."

It had seemed best not to remind him that Dr. Giles had warned of several weeks for healing.

It was a relief when he went over to the cottage, though I'd worried for a minute or two that he'd harass Cal so much that Cal might quit. I hadn't bothered even putting on the coffee for them. They had three hands and two brains between them; they could do it.

In Mora Bay I bought painkillers, with the fervent hope they would improve Ben's mood, and arrived at The Yellow Duck, grateful to face a couple of hours with only a community plan to argue about. I set up the laptop and stepped out on the pub's deck to smell the ocean. The marina was crammed with sailboats, their masts glinting in the sunlight. The Canada Day regatta was scheduled for tomorrow and sailors were busy polishing brass or doing last minute adjustments.

Duff joined me at the railing. "I heard Ben had a fall."

The way the island gossip network functioned, I was surprised he hadn't heard five minutes after it happened, then remembered Cal hadn't been able to get to a phone that fast. "He broke his arm, but it was a clean break, so the doctor doesn't foresee any problems. He'll be flying on one wing for several weeks, though."

Joanna had walked up the ramp from the dock in time to hear my words and we went into our meeting room. "About three months," she said. "At least, that's how long it took when I broke my arm." I must have moaned, for she gave me a sympathetic look. "Is he worrying about all the things he thinks he should be doing and can't?"

"Exactly. And the doctor hasn't even told him yet that it'll take that long to heal. He'll go right out of his mind when he learns that."

"Well, I won't tell him," Joanna said. "Before Derek gets here, can we review the situation regarding Trevor Brentwood and his suit?"

Duff cleared his throat. "I went over to Victoria to see The Island Trusts lawyer. His name is Robert Geraghty. Older guy, but really sharp. He sounded like he could handle Trevor okay. He said he'd represent everybody, including Ben and his mother."

"Is it going to cost a lot?" I couldn't help worrying about the new mortgage on Holly Haven and wondering how much extra Ben might have to pay Cal for help on the cottage and the greenhouse.

"He said he'd charge us all something, but since The Islands Trust owns the Brentwood property, it will be responsible for the major portion of his fees. He said the defense would be much the same for each of the parties, so it's not like he has to do much extra work."

"There'll be extra paperwork, at least." Joanna fiddled with her pen. "But did he say anything about the outcome? Does he think Trevor has a good case?"

Duff said, "He wouldn't commit himself on that, but he did say that Norma had executed a proper deed of gift under seal, which proves her intent to give the property to the Trust. I got the impression that was a good thing. He's coming over to talk to Norma next week."

"I hope she tells him about Trevor hiring those two shrinks to prove she was incompetent," I said. "If she doesn't, I will."

"He said he'd meet with the rest of us together," Duff said. "Ben, Maggie, you two, and me. He'll phone me when he gets his schedule sorted out."

Joanna leaned back in her chair. "Is this suit going to delay the community plan?"

"Geraghty said not." Duff looked around as Derek came in and sat down beside him. "He told me to go ahead on the basis that the property will continue to be owned by the Trust."

"That's a relief." I smiled at Derek. "So have you finished all your recommendations about parks and ecology?"

Derek handed each of us a copy of his report and we got down to work. By the end of two hours, we'd agreed on zoning and basic restrictions for every part of Adriana except the Brentwood property.

"I talked to Norma about that," I said. "She's agreeable to the forest and waterfront being designated park and the rest being agricultural as long as it can't be built on."

Joanna looked relieved. "I'm glad we're not going to have an argument about it. Now we'd better talk about the consultations the Act says we have to do."

We talked for another half an hour about what the trustees on Melfort Island had done and finally agreed that sending a newsletter outlining the provisions of the community plan to all Adriana's property owners should be the next step.

"Holly, you've got most of that information on your computer already," Duff said, "so will you do the newsletter? We can get *The Adriana Advocate* to print off one for each registered landowner. And we'd better have an information meeting so that people can sound off. That'll work better than all of them phoning me at home."

"I know it's been a pain in the butt for you, Duff," Joanna said, "but you'll find it worthwhile. You've got to do whatever it takes to satisfy people so they'll be happy to pass the bylaw making the community plan official."

"Short-term pain for long-term gain, I guess," he said. "I'll talk to the school board secretary about renting the high school auditorium. Derek, I'd like you to attend the information meeting. You have the training and the right language to give detailed answers on why we've made some of these decisions."

"I'll give you my parents' phone number in Sooke." Derek scribbled on a slip of paper. "I'm taking the ferry over to the big island tonight, for the long weekend."

"Oh, gosh, I forgot it's Canada Day tomorrow," Joanna said.

I'd forgotten it for a moment, too. Now I realized that Monday would be a holiday, too, which meant three days with no work done on the cottage. Ben would be frantic.

Duff rose and stuffed his papers into his briefcase. "I move we adjourn to the pub for lunch."

"I'm all for that," I said. It had been a long time since breakfast and Nicky had eaten most of my bacon. Besides, I'd just had an idea.

The lunch crowd had thinned out to half a dozen people so the four of us got a table overlooking the deck and the harbor. The sun shone, the water sparkled, and life was good, except that I had to go home and deal with Ben's bad temper.

The waitress hurried by with a tray of beer and said over her shoulder, "I'll be there in a jiffy."

"She'll never make it," Duff said. "A 'jiffy' is the name of an actual unit of time. It means one one-hundredth of a second."

By the time I'd calculated how many jiffies in a minute, she was back, and we ordered our

usual beer and burgers.

"Derek," I said, "do you have another job to go to after you're finished with us?"

"No," he said, "I don't. But my old man's a contractor, so I can probably work for him until my next term starts."

"How do you feel about working in a market garden? Or building a cottage?"

Derek grinned. "Guess I could handle either one as long as there's somebody to tell me what to do."

In his present mood, Ben would be quite capable of telling Derek what to do, in the most profane terms. I winced at the thought and said, "My husband broke his arm, and this is a busy time for him in the greenhouse, considering he's also building a cottage for his mother. I'll have to talk it over with him, but I think he's going to need help."

"You can let me know," Derek said.

I turned to Duff. "Speaking of bones, did you know that a house cat has two hundred and thirty? A human, who is fifteen times larger than a cat, has only two hundred and six."

Joanna looked across the table at Derek and said, her gray eyes twinkling, "Think we can pick the bones out of that?"



On Sunday afternoon, Maggie and Norma came over to look at the cottage and offer sympathy to Ben. Nicky was always ecstatic to see company and Ben greeted the women cordially but if he'd been a cat, his fur would have been bristling with rage, his tail whipping back and forth.

"I'm sorry about your arm, Benjamin," Maggie said. "I suppose it's made things a bit awkward for you."

"Awkward!" Ben glared at her. "You have no idea what a disaster it is! I can't do a damn thing with my left hand. Can't pound nails, can't weed, can't drive the truck, can't even tie my own damn shoes."

Norma smiled. "Ben, you've only broken an arm. That's hardly the end of the world."

He opened his mouth to argue, then realized who he was arguing with. "No, I guess it isn't. But that's what it feels like." He looked a bit deflated. "I hate being useless. I've got all this stuff I have to do, and I can't do any of it."

"This isn't going to last forever, and you can get other people to work for you for a little while," Norma said. "Holly says you might hire that nice young man, Derek. Think how much you could teach him while you're having a holiday from physical labor. Wouldn't it be fun to crack the whip for a change?"

I'd been too busy defending myself to realize that his male pride in physical competence was injured just as much as his arm and I was grateful to Norma for recognizing the problem.

"I hadn't thought of it that way." Ben turned to me. "I'll phone Derek." Then his face turned red and the fingers on his right hand clenched into a fist. "I can't even deal with the damn phone! Holly, you phone him."

"Of course, I will," I said.

"There you go, Benjamin," Maggie said. "You'll enjoy telling everybody else what to do once you get used to it. I certainly did when I was teaching elementary school. Now, can we go look at the cottage?"

"You'll probably find most of the cats over there," I said. "They're very curious about this

new structure and spend a lot of time sniffing every bit of it they can reach. I'll stay here and make some tea."

When they came back, both Norma and Maggie looked pleased. "It will be a lovely place to live." Norma waved her arm at the sea sparkling around small islands in the strait. "Nice to be up on a hill where you have a sweeping view."

"I can actually imagine living there now," Maggie said. "And, Holly, I didn't know what you meant when you said new lumber smelled good, but now I do."

I brought tea into the living room and, as soon as Maggie sat down, Shaz slowly emerged from under the couch and settled on her lap.

"You have the magic touch, Mother," Ben said.

Maggie looked pleased. "She acts more like a dignified lady than a kitten."

"She's only like that when we have company," I said. "A couple more visits from you, Norma, and she'll be racing around like a normal kitten. You should see what she's like when she gets drunk on catnip."

"Which always seems to happen about four in the morning." Ben sounded aggrieved. "She races through the house yowling, then comes rushing into the bedroom and jumps on Holly and me before taking off again."

"You'd think it was a horse racing up the stairs," I added, "not a five-month-old kitten."

Maggie stroked Shaz, who stretched full length across her lap and purred. "I never noticed before, but she's got a patch of seal and brown that goes around her right hind leg. Like an ankle bracelet, except it's around the knee."

"Cats don't have knees," Norma said.

"Then it's a thigh bracelet," Maggie said.

"They don't need knees," Ben grumbled. "But we do, because they all expect us to kneel to them."

"Her colored fur is getting darker," I said. "I think her tail and ears and eye mask are eventually going to be black. And some of the light sand color on her back is turning a little darker. It may end up as light brown."

"Her fur seems even thicker and softer now." Maggie cooed at the kitten. "You little precious, your feet are so white and dainty. You're my pretty girl."

"In some ways, she really is like a dignified lady." I got up to pour more tea. "She seems to prefer lazing in the house to being outside with the rest of the gang. Perhaps she's afraid of getting sunburn. She won't go out when it's windy because she hates having her fur ruffled and she's back inside at the first drop of rain."

Norma said, "Does she hide under the couch because she's afraid of people? Or of the other cats?"

"That's what I thought at first," I said, "but I've changed my mind. She gets along fine with the other cats. She also doesn't hide from people she sees all the time, including Maggie and Cal. I've looked at her under the couch, when someone new is here, and she seems perfectly relaxed. Sometimes she's even asleep. My guess is that she wants to be where she can hear what's going on but doesn't need to interact with anyone."

"As a great beauty," Maggie said, "perhaps she saves her charm for special people."

"What you're saying, Mother," said Ben, "is that she thinks she's too good for the common herd and refuses to mingle with them."

Maggie took a sprig of green grapes from the plate I'd put out. Shaz reached up with both paws, snagged one of the grapes and ate it.

"I've never seen a cat do that!" Norma said.

I nodded. "She does have some odd tastes for a cat. She likes grated carrot, too."

"A vegetarian cat." Maggie looked thoughtful. "If all cats have such different tastes, it could be a challenge running an animal shelter."

"I don't think animal shelters cater to individual tastes," Norma said. "They have all they can do providing simple food and shelter and veterinary services."

Ben was frowning. "You're not serious about running an animal shelter, I hope. It would be a lot of work, with a lot of frustration. I thought, from what you've said, that you want to lie in bed with cups of tea and look at the view."

"Do you think I'm too old for it?" Maggie demanded, her tone tart.

"Well, no, no, of course not. But..." Ben couldn't seem to think of anything else to say. He knew that implying Maggie was past doing something simply ensured that she'd go out and do it, no matter the consequences. He'd said to me once that he was glad people over sixty-five couldn't get a license to fly small aircraft.

"Perhaps I should run an animal sanctuary, rather than a shelter," Maggie said.

"I don't think there's much difference." I put my teacup back on its saucer. "Except that sanctuaries don't usually euthanize animals."

"I'll talk to Jerry about it," Maggie said. "And the SPCA in Mora Bay, next time I'm there. Ben, I looked at wire netting at the hardware store last week. We'll need a lot of it for the cat run."

"You won't need a cat run if you aren't running an animal shelter," Ben said, "and I certainly don't think you should be. That's what the SPCA is for." He rose. "I'm going to turn the sprinklers off in the garden. At least that's one thing I can do." He went out the front door, across the veranda and down the steps, Nicky at his heels.

"He's being stubborn about that cat run," Maggie said. "I don't want to argue about it just yet, because he's obviously spoiling for a fight, but I won't give up."

"You know I'm on your side, Maggie," I said, "but when you discuss this topic with Ben again, I think I'll just take cover under the couch with Shaz."



VII -- Waterlogged

Derek Jamison came down the driveway on a motorbike Tuesday morning. Nicky went into a paroxysm of barking at this alien, helmeted creature riding a strange vehicle that was smaller than Bouncing Blue Betsy but made even more noise. By the time I opened the back door, Derek had taken off his helmet, revealing a human head, and Nicky was apologizing by licking his face.

I took Derek into the kitchen, poured him a coffee, and introduced him to Ben, who was awkwardly spooning cereal into his mouth with his left hand, while George the Magnificent and Cato sat at his feet, wanting to know why there was no bacon. The two men did a left-handed shake and Ben was just beginning to explain what he wanted done in the greenhouse when Cal rapped at the back door and walked in. He was earlier than usual, but I knew why. He'd heard the motorcycle and couldn't wait to find out who it was and why they were visiting Holly Haven.

I'd just poured coffee for Cal when a flatbed truck came down the driveway, carrying a backhoe to do the septic field. Mick was only a week late, which was actually early by Adriana standards. He came in and, of course, had to have coffee before he could do any work. That meant I had to make another pot before I could pour myself one and, hopefully, escape into my den to work on the trustees' newsletter.

While the coffee pot bubbled and spluttered, I listened to the conversation. Derek was calling Ben 'sir', much to my amusement, and trying to ask him questions, but was being kept busy by Cal wanting to know how much motorcycles cost to run and how they were on wet roads and was there a lot involved in getting licensed. Mick and Ben were comparing notes on broken bones and bad backs. I was just about to head down the hall when the phone rang.

It was Duff. "The information meeting is set for Sunday, July twenty-third. I think we should open up the auditorium at noon so people can come and look at maps and zoning proposals. The actual information meeting will be at seven. Okay?"

"Sounds good to me. What about security for the auditorium?"

"No need for that. The janitor will be around somewhere."

I was surprised. In Victoria we'd have needed more than a janitor. "How soon do you want the newsletter?"

"Yesterday would be nice."

"All right, Duff, I'm on it."

After I hung up, Ben said, "Oh, Holly, would you mind feeding the chickens? Mick wants to get finished quick because he's got another job and I need to show him where I want the septic tank."

I put on rubber boots and gloves, in case Mr. Mighty decided to try killing me, and filled up the feed and water troughs. By the time the hens were clucking contentedly over their breakfast, the four men had gone to the cottage and, except for the roar of the backhoe, life was peaceful again.

Half an hour later I realized the backhoe was silent. I checked the computer clock, but it was only nine forty-five. Not coffee-time yet. Then the back door slammed, and Ben yelled, "Holly!"

His tone worried me. Had he broken his other arm? But he was waiting in the mud room, appropriately, since he looked like he'd been standing in gooey mud up to his knees. "What's happened now?"

He sat down on the bench. "Help me get these boots off. You've got to drive me into Mora Bay to get some copper tubing."

"Why?"

He took a deep breath. "The damn backhoe cut through the damn water line and there's water from hell to damn breakfast, that's why."

I kept quiet while I took off his boots and trousers, helped him into clean pants and tied his sneakers. I turned the heat down to 'warm' under the beef stew on the stove, and grabbed my bag from the bedroom. We left Nicky in the kitchen, sulking, and headed for Mora Bay. Buying the copper tubing was no problem, but I spent a lot of time waiting while various people came over and wanted the details of Ben's fall. This usually led to stories of their own disasters, so that it was nearly noon when we got back in the car.

"Why don't we go to The Yellow Duck for lunch?"

Ben gave me a blank look. "But..."

"But what? Is the water line still spewing?"

"No. We shut off the water at the greenhouse."

"What were the boys doing when you left?"

"Cal showed Derek how to put shingles on, so he was doing that," Ben said. "Mick said he'd get the backhoe going again and finish the field and the hole for the septic tank."

"What about Cal?"

Ben was silent for a minute. "I guess he's supervising."

"Okay, so they don't need you for anything. And if Cal can't figure out what to do with the stew heating on the stove or the loaf of bread I left on the counter, then he's not the man I've known for the last five years." I pointed the car toward The Yellow Duck.

"We haven't eaten out for ages," Ben said.

"Ever since you built the greenhouse, you've been working hard. Like me with the trustee job. I think we're entitled to a little break now and then."

When we were tucked into a corner table with a mug of beer each and hamburgers on order, Ben said, "It feels weird not to be home taking care of stuff."

"But you are taking care of stuff. You're paying three men to do the work you can't do yourself right now."

"When I was a kid, my dad always mowed the lawn and shoveled the walks himself. He never hired it done. He said those things were his responsibility, that it was part of being a homeowner." Ben took a swig of beer. "But I guess hiring people, if you can afford it, is just as good. Provided they do it right."

"If they don't do it right, then you fire them."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Can you imagine me firing Cal?"

"Well, no." Cal was part of the territory we'd acquired when we moved to Adriana. Good neighbor, a very handy handyman and now a dear friend.

Ben leaned back and looked out the harbor for a minute. "You know, I felt really dumb when Norma told me that breaking an arm wasn't the end of the world. I realize I'm lucky to be healthy and able to work hard, but I didn't know how to tell her that without talking about her illness."

"She wouldn't have minded, Ben. I'm sure she thinks about it every day."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't want to face what she's facing."

"You must have missed elementary biology when you went to school. We all have to die, sooner or later." I reached over and patted his hand. "I know you're only eleven in cat years, but there's no denying that you'll be twelve eventually."

"Yeah, yeah." He did more staring at the harbor. "Okay, so I'll have to think about it

someday, but I don't want to think about it right now. I feel young and I've got a new career. I'm enjoying life."

"Even with a broken arm?" Cruel, but I thought he deserved it.

He turned his head to look at me. "Yes! Even with a broken arm. But it's damn frustrating, Holly, so don't take it personally when I blow off steam."

"Okay, just don't get upset when I remind you that eventually we're all going to be permanently out of print."

The waitress brought our burgers and Ben sniffed appreciatively. "Been months since I had one of these."

I cut his burger into quarters, easier to manipulate with only one hand.

"Thanks," he said. "But I'll never get used to asking you to help me all the time. I hate being dependent."

"You could put me on the payroll."

Ben was learning to huff even better than Doran.



By Wednesday night, the water line was fixed, the septic tank installed, and I'd delivered the trustees' newsletter to the *Advocate*, which had promised to print it right away. We'd also have to pay for the staff to mail it out, but they did that kind of job fairly often, so I was sure it would be done right.

Thursday morning, I drove Ben to the hospital to see if his arm was ready for a cast.

Dr. Giles removed the splints, told him the arm was doing fine and put a fiberglass cast around the arm, immobilizing both wrist and elbow. "That's to keep the fracture from moving, so that it'll heal properly."

"Can I have a shower now?" Ben demanded.

"A bath would be better so you can hang the arm outside the tub," Dr. Giles said. "You've got to keep the cast dry. Put a plastic bag on it and secure it above and below with rubber bands. Or buy pre-made plastic covers with Velcro fastenings."

"Even in the bath?"

"Yes," Dr. Giles said firmly. "Especially in the bath." He folded a square of heavy cotton to make a sling and tied it around Ben's neck. "You're to wear this, too, to give your arm support. You can put a folded towel between the sling and your neck to keep the sling from rubbing on your skin."

"So can I go back to work now?"

Dr. Giles raised his eyebrows. "What do you think you're going to accomplish with just one hand, especially your non-dominant hand?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Stick to brushing your teeth and having a beer now and then," Dr. Giles said. "It's summer and the weather is warm. If you sweat under the cast, that could cause mold or mildew to develop."

"Oh, that doesn't sound appetizing." Ben knew plenty about mold and mildew from learning how to run a greenhouse.

"It's not," Dr. Giles said. "Believe me, it's not."

"How long do I have to wear this contraption?"

Dr. Giles sighed. "The whole process of bone healing can take up to eighteen months, but I'd

say the strength of your arm will be eighty percent of normal in three months."

Ben looked crushed. "Eighty percent? Three months? That long?"

"Be reasonable," Dr. Giles said. "We're talking broken bone here, not a pimple."

Ben turned to me. "I guess you were right. I'm going to be on holiday for a while."

In the car, I said, "We could go to Hawaii for a couple of weeks."

"I couldn't stand it. I need to keep track of what's happening in the garden, make decisions about building the cottage."

I felt that way myself. I couldn't bear to go away until the community plan was official. And we couldn't leave Maggie and Norma on their own.

We were home in time for me to make fresh tomato soup and roast beef sandwiches to feed our crew. Ben seemed to have accepted his fate, at least temporarily, for he opened a beer and sat in the living room with George in his lap and Nicky at his feet until Cal and Derek came in.

"How long you gotta keep that on?" Cal pointed at Ben's cast.

"The doctor says he'll X-ray it in a month to see how it's healing. But he also says it'll likely be three months before I can use it much."

Cal shook his head. "Too bad. You just never know what's around the next corner. Makes me think twice about buying a Harley, I can tell you."

We all stared at him. "You can't be serious," Ben said. "Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?"

"No," Cal said, "I haven't. But I've been watching Derek here and it doesn't look like it would be that hard."

Derek said, "There is a knack to it, though." I could see he was struggling with the idea that somebody three times his age and with no experience would even think about buying a bike.

I was struggling with it, too, but guessed that Cal was imagining himself in black leather jacket and boots, with a shiny black helmet and bones that were fifty years younger. I wondered what Maggie would think about it but, knowing my mother-in-law, she'd probably buy her own helmet so she could ride with him. Ben would really be frothing at the mouth if that happened. I also wondered if Cal still thought of speed limits as a challenge, but dismissed the thought. Adriana roads had built-in speed limits: bumps, potholes, and tight curves.

"Guess you need a special license to drive it, do you?" Cal asked Derek.

"For sure. You can go to Motor Vehicles and do a written exam and get a learner's license, or you can take a driver training course and get a license right away. I'd say the driver training course is the best way to go."

Especially for somebody who's seventy-two or so and wants to look like twenty-two, I thought.

Cal nodded. "I'll look into that. Don't know if I'll have time this summer, though. Ben's gonna need help for a while and I'm weaving some shawls and bed throws for the fall fair." He looked at me. "Maggie did some more designs for me."

"That's great." I turned to Derek and said, "Cal raises Angora goats and does the whole process with the wool, right through to the dying and weaving. I think it was last year he won first prize at the Vancouver fair. Or was it the year before?"

"Wow!" Derek looked slightly stunned.

"Year before," Cal said. "Before I forget, Holly, the Perrys want me to cut down their trees this winter, after the tourist season is over."

"Good. I'm glad it was you they asked. If they don't give you a copy of Derek's map showing which trees can go, I'll give you mine."

"I've got some extra copies," Derek said. "I'm kind of interested to see what they're going to do with the information I gave them." He turned to me. "One of your cats keeps climbing up the ladder and walking around the roof. A little black and brown tabby. I was worried he'd fall off, but he seems okay up there."

Ben smiled. "George the Magnificent is steadier on his feet than I am. But he's got the advantage of having four of them."

"George is King of Holly Haven," I said. "Because you're on his property, he thinks he has the right to check on what you're doing."

"He's the king?" Derek looked surprised. "I thought that big one I see every time I come in the house would be the leader. He's twice the size of the tabby."

"That would be Ming," I said. "He has no political ambition at all. And he doesn't go outside much because he's afraid of birds."

Derek seemed to have spent most of lunchtime looking surprised. "Afraid? A cat who's afraid of birds?"

"Psychological damage," I said. "He was attacked by a family of purple martins when he was only two or three months old."

The phone rang and I got up to answer it. "It's Maggie, dear. Are you home all afternoon? I need to come and get some eggs."

"Come any time," I said. "The boys are just about to go back to work."

"The shingles are all done," Derek said to Ben. "What do you want me to do now?"

"Come out to the greenhouse with me," Ben said. "There's some stuff ready to harvest both there and in the garden."

The men trooped off toward the greenhouse and the cottage, followed by Nicky and the three Siamese teenagers, Caesar, Cato, and Poppy. Ming and Kaylie went outside to lie in the shade of the cedar shrub by the kitchen deck, only a quick dash to safety if a sparrow flew over, and George sprawled in a patch of sunshine on the living room carpet. I knelt and peered under the couch. Shaz opened her eyes, stretched, yawned, and said, "Prrrrt?"

"It's okay, little sweetie. Just checking to see you're all right."

Maggie arrived half an hour later. "Put the tea on, Holly. I can stay for an hour or so and I have gossip."

"Oh, good!" I put the kettle on, and Maggie disappeared into the living room. When I followed with the tray a few minutes later, Shaz was purring on Maggie's lap. "So, what's the gossip?"

"Norma's grandsons, John and Bruce, came to see her on Monday."

"I'm glad. Was the visit a good one for her?"

Maggie let her hand rest lightly on Shaz's cloud-soft fur while she took a sip of tea. "It was very emotional at first, but yes, I think all three of them felt happy about seeing one another. The boys already knew about her illness."

"I suppose Trevor told them."

"Yes, he did," Maggie said. "Norma wrote to both boys after Trevor's visit in June, but of course, he telephoned them. I gathered, from the questions the boys asked Norma, that Trevor told them to lean on their grandmother about the property."

"And were they leaning on her?"

Maggie shook her head. "No, they weren't. I had the impression they were simply trying to learn her side of the story." She paused for a moment. "None of them mentioned Trevor at all."

"Do you think the boys are on her side?"

"Yes, I do, but they wouldn't want to bad-mouth Trevor to his mother, and she wouldn't want to bad-mouth their father to them."

"It's tough trying to keep peace in a family. Though I doubt Trevor cares about peace or family. What's he expect her to do?" I was getting irritated. "Pretend she's loony so there's a chance of setting aside the agreement?"

"That would no doubt please Trevor, but she'd never do it. She did what she wanted to do with the property when she deeded it to the Islands Trust. That brat – and he is a brat, even if he is over fifty – has phoned three times in the last ten days. After the second call, I took over answering the phone. Now when he calls, I just say his mother is sleeping."

"I wish he wouldn't nag her. She deserves to enjoy what time she has left."

"I told the boys that when I helped them carry boxes out to their car," Maggie said. "Perhaps they can exert some influence."

"Boxes?"

"Norma gave them all the family photo albums and mementoes. They were pleased about it and so was she. And they promised to come back and visit as soon as they could. She wants to give them vegetables and flowers from her garden." Maggie looked thoughtful. "I had the feeling she regarded those as more important than anything else."

"They're living gifts. Photographs last longer, though."

"Not always. I can still remember eating fresh green peas in the garden when I was four," Maggie said. "A picture wouldn't have captured that wonderful taste."



A week later, on Friday, July fourteenth, Ben and I collected Maggie from Norma's house, and drove to The Yellow Duck for the meeting with the Islands Trust lawyer. I kept my fingers crossed that it wouldn't be a disaster and tried to remember Henry's lessons in Buddhism. Duff had phoned the day before. "Geraghty will arrive after lunch and spend the weekend here, interview Norma, play a little golf and look around. You guys okay with meeting at two-thirty?"

"Absolutely." I was eager to do anything that would get the suit resolved. It had been perched in the back of my mind, flexing its talons, for weeks.

Robert Geraghty was already with Duff and Joanna in the back room when we walked in. He rose to shake hands with each of us. He reminded me of a heron, very tall and thin and slightly stooped, with gray hair, a gray suit, and a lugubrious expression. I also noticed that he wore a deep pink tie and that his smile lent real warmth to his gray eyes. A tape recorder was on the table.

He sat down. "I'm going to tape this interview, if none of you object. My assistant will type it up and send you each a copy next week." No one objected and he leaned over to turn on the machine. He began by identifying himself, then stating the date, time, and purpose of the meeting.

The formality made me nervous, and my voice shook a little when it was my turn to introduce myself. "Mr. Geraghty, why is Trevor suing all of us? It seems to me his argument, if he has one, is with his mother and The Islands Trust."

Geraghty smiled. "I believe his counsel is using the shotgun approach. Sue enough people and you're bound to hit at least one of them."

"Charming!" Joanna sighed. "I suppose that's why we three trustees were named at all. We certainly had nothing to do with Mrs. Brentwood's decision to deed her property to the Trust."

"Did none of you speak with her about it?" Geraghty asked.

Duff shook his head. "I certainly didn't. The first I heard of it was when her lawyer notified us that it had happened."

"And I didn't," Joanna said. "I'm the outside trustee, from Melfort Island, and I don't know anyone on Adriana except on a business basis."

"I talked to Norma about it," I said, "but that was at least a couple of years ago and I spoke as a friend, not as a trustee. I've only been a trustee for a little over six months."

Geraghty nodded. "Unless I discover facts which refute what you've told me, I would say the trustees have nothing to worry about." He turned to me. "However, you, your husband and your mother-in-law are accused, in essence, of influencing Mrs. Brentwood to disinherit her son."

"I never said she should disinherit him," I said. "She wanted to have her land kept the way it is, and I suggested that the only way she could accomplish that was give it to the Trust and have it designated as a park."

"It amounts to the same thing," Geraghty said.

"I suppose it does, but at the time I wasn't thinking about Trevor. I was just trying to help a friend accomplish what she wanted to do. She didn't like the idea at first. She said property should remain within the family. But I think she changed her mind when she found out Trevor planned to subdivide the hundred and sixty acres and build a hotel, golf course, and marina on it."

"It wasn't only that," Maggie said. "Trevor sent two of his psychiatrist friends over here to stay with Norma and me. They spent most of their time hanging around talking with us instead of fishing. We only found out afterwards that Trevor was trying to have his mother certified as mentally incompetent, so that he could take control of her and the property." Maggie gave Geraghty a fierce look. "As far as I'm concerned, Trevor Brentwood deserves to be disinherited."

"I know who he is, and I've made it my business to learn as much as I could about him," Geraghty said smoothly, "but we're not here to discuss personalities. As you are no doubt aware, there is an extremely strong legal tradition that property should remain within the family and that tradition is what Mr. Brentwood is basing his suit on. In law, Mrs. Brentwood has the right to do as she chooses with her own property, but sometimes the courts will step in when they judge that an individual's actions in that regard have been unfair."

Maggie slammed her small fist on the table. "Well, I certainly influenced Norma to disinherit her son. And I'll stand up in court and tell everybody why, too."

Geraghty smiled at her, then looked at Ben. "Mr. Sutton, what about you? Did you try to influence Mrs. Brentwood in any way?"

"No," Ben said. "Never. As far as I can tell, I'm only part of this meeting because I'm Holly's husband and Maggie's son. And I'll probably have the privilege of paying the legal fees."

I patted him on his good arm. "It's a tough life, honey."

Maggie snorted. "I'll pay my own legal fees, Benjamin."

Geraghty spent an hour asking questions, then turned off the tape deck. "I've checked into the motel, so my next step is to talk with Mrs. Brentwood. Could someone give me directions?"

"I'll do better than that," Maggie said. "I live with Norma, so you could drive me home. And if you'd like to stay and have dinner with us, you're more than welcome."

"Thank you," Geraghty said, rising. "Let's see how it goes. Mrs. Brentwood may feel too tired for company by the time the afternoon is over."

He and Maggie left, then Joanna said she had to get home because one of her brothers, a

plumber, was coming to fix a plugged drain.

"I'm supposed to be working," Duff said, "but I could stand a beer right about now. You two care to join me?"

Ben looked at his watch. "I've got time for one, I guess. I want to get home before five and see what the boys have accomplished and decide what I want Derek to work on when he comes back Monday. And Cal might work tomorrow if he's in the mood."

We went out into the pub's main room and ordered beer with a plate of nachos. Duff asked Ben about his broken arm and got the full details, including the ban against having a shower.

Duff said, "I trust you can take a bath, though. Did you know that a pair of human feet contains a quarter of a million sweat glands?"

I groaned. "Duff, where do you find all this weird information?"

"People tell me things because they know it's my hobby. And I come across quite a lot on the internet."

"Well, I don't know if cats have an equal number of sweat glands in their feet," I said, "but I do know that after they eat, they immediately wash themselves. Their instinct tells them to remove the food scent so predators won't smell the food and come after them."

"That's one of the reasons they always smell clean and fresh," Ben said.

"You two know a lot about cats," Duff said. "Maybe you can explain what's wrong with this cat my niece was telling me about." He swallowed a mouthful of beer. "Chrissy and her husband bought an old house down at Ellis Bay six months ago. The realtor said a cat came with the house but wouldn't be a problem because he lived outside."

"See?" Ben was looking at me. "Lots of cats live outside all the time."

I didn't know how he'd managed to interpret 'a cat' as 'lots of cats' but that told me he was still looking for a way of talking Maggie out of her cat run. "So, what does this cat do, Duff?"

"The realtor told Chrissy the bucket of water out by the carport belonged to the cat and it had to be kept full and freshened up regularly because he liked to sleep in it. All year round."

"What?" Duff really had my attention now. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Neither had Chrissy, but sure enough, the cat would come and yell at the door if the bucket wasn't full. When Chrissy went out and put more water in, the cat was happy. He'd climb into the bucket and go to sleep."

Ben looked amazed. "He must have been very busy every morning, licking himself dry."

Duff shook his head. "Apparently not. Chrissy told me he didn't seem to worry about it. He'd just come dripping up onto the veranda to get his breakfast."

"Makes me wonder what happened to that cat during his life to make him want to sleep in a bucket of water," Ben said.

"It has nothing to do with keeping himself clean," I said. "He must have started doing that as a kitten and now it's a habit. But it is extremely odd. Cats aren't normally fond of water, except as a drink."

"Too bad." Duff shrugged. "I thought you might be able to add something to my store of knowledge."

"How do you remember all those facts?" I asked.

"That's easy." Duff grinned. "Did you know that the human brain can hold five times as much information as the Encyclopedia Britannica?"



VIII -- A Missing Politician

On Sunday, I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to find out how Norma's talk with Robert Geraghty had gone. "Ben, do you want to run down to Gordon Bay with me?"

"No, I'd rather stay here and get something done."

"Like what?" I was afraid he'd try something foolish and break the other arm.

"I'm going out to the greenhouse with a pen and pad of paper," he said, with exaggerated patience. "I intend to make a list, using my inefficient left hand, of what needs to be done this coming week. That way I won't forget anything when Derek comes to work tomorrow."

"You could dictate notes to me."

"No. I'm going to do this myself, Holly."

I thought of telling him his middle name should be Stubborn but that wouldn't get either of us anywhere. I fetched my bag from the bedroom and was heading to the mud room for the car keys when George raced in through the cat door. It looked as though he had something in his mouth, but he was moving too fast for me to be sure.

"Holly, that cat's got a dead mouse." Ben stood in the mud room doorway. "We can't let him keep it. He'll have it in pieces all over the living room rug."

In this case, I knew that "we" meant me. One needed both hands and quick reflexes to grab a cat intending to parade around showing off his hunting prowess. Ben stepped aside for me as I dashed back into the house and chased George.

Mr. Magnificent dropped the mouse halfway across the living room but, before I could pick it up, Kaylie came off the couch like a cream-colored streak and snatched it almost out of my fingers. She ran into the kitchen, where Ben cornered her, and dropped the mouse.

"Get the mouse," I said. He could do that one-handed.

Ben was too late. Kaylie picked it up and ran back toward the living room. I caught up with her before she managed to escape under the couch, but she dropped the mouse again and George grabbed it before I could and headed for the kitchen, no doubt intending to take it back outside where he could brag without danger of losing the trophy to his weird two-legged servants.

This time Ben managed to forestall the King. He'd shut the door between mud room and kitchen. Dismayed at the loss of his escape hatch, George dropped the mouse, and I finally snagged it.

"If this poor creature hadn't been dead to begin with," I said, "it would have died of fright by the time I rescued it."

"Not necessarily. Remember all the live rabbits, snakes and birds George has brought into the house? We usually managed to let them escape."

The memory of George's youthful exploits made me, as always, wonder why I'd ever thought that living with six cats would be such a wonderful experience. I dropped the mouse into the garbage can on my way to the car.

When I arrived at Gordon Bay, Maggie and Norma were sitting on the garden seat below the kitchen window, admiring a jungle of beans, peas, and frothy green carrot tops. "Get one of those folding chairs by the greenhouse, Holly, and join us," Norma said.

I brought the chair over and set it up. BJ was still following me, and I decided to see if he'd do his usual tricks for me. "Roll over, BJ." He lay down and rolled onto his back. "Good boy!" But, when he tried to get up, he couldn't. He rolled back and forth, his long, silky ears flopping over his face.

"He's put on too much weight," Norma said. "I've been feeding him more treats than I should."

"Spoiling him rotten," Maggie said comfortably. "I've been doing it, too."

I was reaching down to help him regain his feet when he finally managed it himself. "You poor little sausage, you'll have to go on a diet."

"Mr. Geraghty said dachshunds were originally bred to fight badgers," Norma said. "It's a good thing we don't have any around here, because the only way BJ could fight a badger would be to roll on it."

She'd given me the perfect opening. "So how did your talk with Mr. Geraghty go?"

"Oh, it was fine, Holly. I told him that Trevor was always greedy, even as a child and gave him some examples. And I told him about those two shrinks Trevor sent over here. They'd left me their business cards and I gave those to Mr. Geraghty."

"That's good. Did he say anything about how he thought the case would go?"

"I don't think lawyers ever do that," Norma said. "He seemed pleased, though, when I showed him my will. I've left everything to Trevor, of course, so I really haven't disinherited him."

I wondered what she had to leave. The furniture in the house, and perhaps she had a little money in the bank. But my curiosity would have to wait. Maggie might volunteer the information someday.

"Not quite everything." Maggie reached down to pat BJ. "She specifically left the animals to me."

"Yes," Norma said, "Maggie will give them a good home. Trevor has never been interested in animals."

Other than himself, I thought. I could just imagine what would happen to BJ and the cats if Trevor had any say in it.

"Are you still thinking about an animal sanctuary, Maggie?" I asked. "If you're going to do it, you have to apply to the trustees for permission, under the current bylaws. That requirement probably won't change when we do a bylaw for the community plan."

"I haven't made up my mind," Maggie said, "but there's no hurry."

Norma shifted on the seat. "Maggie, could you get me a cigarette, please?"

Maggie went into the kitchen and came back out with a homemade cigarette. As soon as Norma lit it, I knew by the smell that it was marijuana. "When did you two reactivate the granny grow op?" The year before, a neighbor had given them some marijuana to try, and they'd planted seeds from it in Norma's little greenhouse. I'd forgotten to ask if the plants had grown, and they'd probably decided the less said about it the better.

Maggie laughed. "We never shut it down. We harvested the first two plants, but we didn't do anything with them until a couple of months ago. Then Norma read that it's used as an appetite stimulant and a gastrointestinal sedative, so she tried it, and it works."

"That's terrific," I said. "Does it give you a high, too, Norma?"

She sucked in some smoke, held it, and then released it. "I don't get giddy or silly, the way I would with alcohol," Norma said. "But this article I read said marijuana is also an antidepressant and a tranquilizer and I can attest to that. I feel a lot better since I started smoking it."

"It's supposed to be an antibiotic as well," Maggie said, "so now and then I have one, too. We planted more seeds in the spring, but we may have to buy some from our farmer friend if these plants don't develop quickly enough."

"Does Dr. Giles know you're smoking it?" I asked.

"Not officially," Norma said. "I asked him what he thought about it, and he said it's been known to have some good effects. I've never told him I actually use it. If the pain gets worse, I'll have to go on heavy-duty painkillers, I guess."

"I wish he'd known about the cancer last year, when you had pneumonia," I said.

"It was way too late even then. He says I've probably had it for ten years or more, but there were no symptoms until this spring. An ordinary medical checkup wouldn't have found it." Norma took another puff. "This cancer is the way I'm fated to go, and that's all right. I'm at home and I can play in my garden. Things could be worse, Holly."

Doran came wandering out of the kitchen door, yawning and stretching. When he saw me, his tail perked straight up and he trotted over to rub his forehead against my shin. He walked around Norma and Maggie, sniffed the air, decided he didn't like the smell of marijuana smoke and came up on my lap. "I should be going home, Doran," I said, and lifted him down. His ears went back and he smacked my ankle.

"Ouch! Why did you do that?"

Norma laughed. "He's king of the castle and you simply are not allowed to say no to him. Ever."

"You're a spoiled brat." I allowed him back on my lap.

"That's true," Maggie said. "I picked sweetpeas last week and put them in a wide-mouthed vase on the coffee table. Doran kept sticking his head in and drinking out of it. I didn't want him doing that because sometimes we have arrangements with flowers, like lily of the valley, which are poisonous. I kept telling him not to do it but naturally he didn't pay attention. Finally, I put the sweetpeas into a vase that had such a narrow neck there was no way he could drink from it."

"Somehow I have the feeling that's not the end of the story."

Maggie smiled. "The next morning, I discovered he'd knocked the vase over. The carpet was soaked and there were sweetpea petals everywhere. I told him he was an Evil Boy, but he'd made his point. What Doran wants Doran gets. Or else."

Norma rose. "Come and look at the far end of the garden, Holly, where we have the flowers. It's doing really well." Doran immediately jumped down and followed her.

"Seeing that the Prince of Evil has given me permission, I will."

At the east end of the garden was a trellis covered in sweetpeas and, in front of them, a broad patch of tiny purple flowers, so dark they were almost black. "They're beautiful. Are they violets?"

"No, violas. Violets are never that dark. These last until late fall, too."

I bent down to touch a finger to one small pansy-like face, wishing for the umpteenth time that I didn't have a black thumb. "They look like purple velvet."

Norma led me to the right. "This year I planted California poppies among the zucchini plants. Don't they look marvelous?"

I laughed aloud in delight. The delicate silken petals of bright orange were a whimsical touch, dancing among the enormous green leaves of the squash plant. Again, I bent down to caress a glowing petal. Before I could straighten up, something landed on my back, settled down and began to purr.

I decided it was safer not to move. "Is that Doran?"

"Who else?" Norma said. "He does that when I'm weeding."

"I suppose I'm a very convenient rickshaw," I said, "but there's a limit to what my back will stand." I slowly straightened up, giving the Prince of Evil time to jump down with some pretense to dignity. "I hope you'll forgive me, your Majesty."

"Huff!" he said, and stalked away.



On Monday, Holly Haven was once again bustling with activity, including trucks delivering material and complaints at morning coffee time. Cal expressed sorrow that I'd run out of peanut butter cookies, though he thought ginger snaps were all right in their way, and Ben said, "My arm itches under the cast. It's driving me crazy. I don't suppose you have a knitting needle or something like it that I could scratch with."

"Dr. Giles said not to do that. You might break the skin and get an infection. He suggested tapping the cast or blowing air from a blow-dryer down into it."

"Sounds like witchcraft to me," Ben said, but he went off to the bathroom to use the blow-dryer and came back with the news that it had helped.

After Derek and Cal went back to work, Ben made some phone calls. He'd quickly learned how to punch buttons with his left hand, but I could tell by his face that it was irking him not to be able to use his right hand to scribble notes.

When he was finished, I said, "How's Derek doing in the greenhouse?" Being an ecology expert was one thing; distinguishing between a weed and a viable plant was something else.

"Much better than I thought he would," Ben said. "He says his mother has been into organic gardening ever since he can remember, and he spent a lot of time helping her. He seems to enjoy it, too, which is also more than I expected."

I spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon catching up with housework, making peanut butter cookies to keep Cal happy and, finally, doing last-minute tasks in preparation for the trustee meeting on Thursday. It was nearly five when I realized George the Magnificent had been pacing in and out of my den and complaining softly.

"What is it, your Majesty? I know I haven't been paying proper attention to you today. Is that your problem?" He couldn't be hungry because I'd picked noon to give the tribe their weekly tuna treat. I moved to my big armchair, but he didn't seem interested in my lap. He stood in the doorway, stared at me and meowed.

"Where's Cato?" I said. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen Cato since the teenagers had followed Ben out to the cottage site after breakfast. This was unusual, because Cato usually stayed close to his mentor, George. "Let's go find him."

I don't know if George understood or was simply happy that I was moving, but he trotted along with me out to the cottage. Cal was busy stringing electrical wire with Derek as his gofer. "Have you seen Cato?" I asked.

"Which one is he?" Cal said.

"He's built like a Siamese, but his fur is pure white, he has bright blue eyes, and he talks all the time."

"Oh, that one! Always follows George around." Cal screwed up his face. "I can't rightly recall the last time I saw him. Might have been this morning. They were all out here checking up on me then."

That wasn't much help. "Are there any cat-sized hiding places in here? Where he might accidentally get shut in?"

Cal shook his head. "Sorry, Holly. And he's not on the roof because we checked for cats before we took the ladders away."

George and I went back to the house. I'd feel really silly if Cato was merely sound asleep on

one of the beds upstairs. We did a thorough search of three bedrooms and the bathroom. We looked on and under the beds and in the closets, and all we found was Ming and Kaylie trying to have their afternoon nap on one of the beds, Poppy and Caesar on another and Shaz underneath the third. All five raised their heads, glared at me, and went back to sleep.

"At least everybody but Cato is accounted for," I said.

"Meow," George said, and headed for the stairs.

Searching the main floor took much longer. The master bedroom, two dens, living room and kitchen all had many cupboards to be opened and little dark corners to be investigated. By this time, I was getting worried. If Cato had been anywhere in the house, by now he'd have been trotting after us and chattering about whatever adventure had kept him from George's side.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs and called one more time. "Cato!" I held my breath and listened, but heard no answering meow.

"All right, George, let's go see Ben." We went out to the greenhouse, checking the garden on the way. Ben didn't usually let the cats into the greenhouse, but Cato might have slipped in unnoticed.

Ben was slowly weeding around his seedlings with his good left hand. "I'm sure Cato didn't come in here," he said, but he helped me look under the benches and behind the stack of tools in the corner. I glanced up toward the roof joists, wondering if Cato could have jumped up that far.

"You've got a big crop of cobwebs up there," I said. "Don't you ever sweep them down?"

"Of course not. They're spider webs, not cobwebs, and I don't disturb them because even spiders deserve a home of their own."

"I notice you don't extend that privilege to weeds."

"That's different," Ben said. "Have you checked the house?"

"Yes. All the other cats are there." Except George, who was still at my feet.

"The carport? Hen house? Workshop?"

"No."

"I'll help," he said. "Time I quit messing around in here anyway."

We walked back over to the house with Cal and Derek, who were also finished for the day. Derek climbed on his motorbike and zoomed off down the road. Cal watched him go and expelled a heartfelt sigh. "I'll have a look in my house. I always leave a couple of windows open, so he might have gone in there to visit Daisy. I'll call you if I find him."

I doubted Cato would have spent time with Daisy. The calico was fairly possessive of her house and her human. "Thanks, Cal."

Ben and I combed through the outbuildings, but no Cato. I was really getting worried now. What could have happened to him?

"I'll double check the upstairs," Ben said.

"I already did that."

"Won't hurt to do it again," Ben said. "They can get into such darn tiny little places, you know. They use their whiskers to determine if the space they're entering is big enough for them."

"Yes, I know." It was annoying to be lectured by somebody who, five years ago, knew absolutely nothing about cats, and thought they were boring because all they did was sleep. I comforted myself with the thought that my teaching had been successful.

Ben went upstairs and searched while I put a casserole in the oven. When he came downstairs, we went out into the meadow and began calling Cato. George sat on the deck with the rest of the clan and watched us.

"I think we'd better search the whole property," Ben said grimly.

We started at the northwest corner and went around the perimeter, peering into blackberry vines, looking up into trees and calling. By the time we got back, it was almost nine and the casserole was a black lump.

I scrubbed at the tears on my face with one hand. "I just don't understand where he could get to."

Ben looked like a thundercloud. "An eagle might have got him."

"Isn't he too big for an eagle?"

"Eagles catch salmon heavier than Cato."

"Salmon don't have teeth or claws, though," I said. "Ming might have made a fuss if an eagle had been around. You know how afraid of birds he is."

"That wimp would have been hiding under the bed."

"No, he wouldn't; he'd have been pacing around, meowing, telling everybody there was danger outside. What about raccoons?" I went into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face. When I came out, I said, "Let's have a drink and see if we can come up with any ideas."

"If it was the raccoons," Ben said, when we were sitting on the front veranda with our drinks, "that means I shouldn't feed them anymore. That would discourage them from coming around here."

"That won't work," I said. "You started feeding them in the first place because they were getting into the garbage can every night and spreading garbage all over the yard. They've never done that since. They don't even bother the chickens, so I don't see why they'd go after a cat."

"Maybe he got too sassy with one of them."

There were so many possibilities and no way of knowing which one was right. All I could think of at that moment was that if Cato was on the property, he must be unconscious or dead, otherwise he'd have answered our calls. "Do you think somebody might have stolen him?"

Ben looked startled. "He's a handsome boy, but with so many cats at the SPCA needing homes, who would risk stealing one?"

"I don't know. I guess I'd rather believe that's what happened than think of him being taken by an eagle or a raccoon."

Ben rose. "I'm going in and start phoning the neighbors. Maybe he went visiting and someone accidentally shut him inside a building."

I followed him and poured myself another drink. For the moment there was nothing more I could do to find my little white politician. When I went back out on the veranda, I nearly started crying again. George was sitting at the edge of the rose garden, giving out long, mournful wails. Unable to endure both his grief and my own, I went back inside and shut the door so I couldn't hear him.

At eleven, Ben came into the living room, sat down, and sighed. "Nobody's seen Cato. In fact, nobody's ever seen any of our cats, not since Henry died. I told you our tribe stays mostly on the property."

"'Mostly' isn't good enough," I said.

"Come on, I'll make cocoa." Ben headed for the kitchen. "We might as well get some sleep and start looking again first thing in the morning."

Sleep was impossible. George, curled up on my pillow, sighed every now and then, and I kept listening for the cat flap.

Eventually morning came but still no Cato.



IX -- Bad Poet, No Cookie!

At dawn I crawled out of bed and slung on my robe and slippers. Nicky raised his head, decided it was far too early to wake up and went back to sleep but George joined me as I headed out the back door. We walked down to the top of the meadow. The King seemed as agile and energetic as ever but my whole body ached with weariness. I began calling Cato, the sound of my voice alternately swallowed up by the silence or overwhelmed by small birds suddenly trilling territorial songs from the treetops.

Angry chattering made both of us turn quickly to look at a small copse of trees near the fence. The scolding was coming from a squirrel racing up a tall Douglas fir. The first fifty feet of the tree was bare of branches but had old, dead ivy vines twining around the trunk, much higher than I could reach. A young raccoon was chasing the squirrel, using the ivy for footholds. If the squirrel could reach the branches, he'd be able to run out on a small branch that wouldn't support the raccoon and, from there, leap into another tree. Would he reach the branches in time?

I needn't have worried. When the raccoon ran out of ivy, he had second thoughts about his chances on the bare trunk. He stopped and would no doubt have shaken his fist if he hadn't needed all his claws to hang on. Instead, he cursed the squirrel and awkwardly backed down the tree. The squirrel turned around, perched head-down with his tail flicking, and laughed.

I was glad the squirrel had escaped but didn't feel much like laughing with him. I called for Cato one more time, then returned to the house to help Ben dress and to make breakfast.

"I could really do with some bacon and eggs this morning," Ben said, "if you wouldn't mind cutting up the bacon for me. I'm sick of oatmeal."

I'd been making oatmeal because it was easy for him to eat one-handed, but the thought of bacon and eggs made my mouth water, too. The bacon wasn't even sizzling before I had an audience of five cats and a dog, all figuratively licking their lips.

"One piece each," I said, "and make it last because bacon is expensive and we don't want to ruin the Houseboy's budget." They wouldn't make it last, of course. Nicky swallowed treats so fast I doubted he even tasted them, and the cats weren't much better.

I prepared Ben's plate, then sat down to my own. George put a delicate paw on my knee, and I dropped a small piece of bacon on the floor for him. Before he could grab it, Kaylie snatched the bacon right out from under his nose. Perhaps the emotional atmosphere in the house made her think the time was ripe to grab the throne but she couldn't have been more wrong. George hissed and smacked her head so hard she dropped the bacon. Instead of picking it up, as I thought he'd do, he continued smacking her and forced her backwards halfway across the kitchen before she turned and fled.

"Good for you, George!" Ben said.

George marched back to his bacon, grumbling. I gave him a second piece as a reward for putting Princess Kaylie in her place.

Derek roared in on his motorbike at eight-twenty. "No sign of Cato? Geez, that's too bad. What do you want me to do?"

"You'd better work with Cal this morning," Ben said. "Holly and I are going to do another search."

"You have ten minutes for a coffee, Derek," I said. "Cal is never late."

But by nine, Cal still hadn't shown up. Ben paced the kitchen, looking nearly as short-tempered as George. "What's the matter with the man? He's never late. I'm going to phone him."

We need to get out there and look for Cato."

Just as he picked up the phone, Cal's truck rolled down the driveway. This did not improve Ben's mood. "Why did he drive over here? He only lives next door."

"I think the truck came from the other direction," Derek said.

He and Ben both went to the back door, and I heard Ben yell, "Cato!"

I dropped the dish towel and ran outside. Sure enough, there was Cato in Cal's arms, already talking everybody's ear off in semi-Siamese. I took my snowy-white boy from Cal and cuddled him while I scolded. George paced around my feet, yelling. When I put Cato down, George smacked him across the face and chased him into the house, the teenager babbling excuses every step of the way.

"Isn't George glad to see him?" Derek asked.

"Of course, he is," I said, "but he has to give Cato hell for leaving and getting everybody upset." Maybe another reason why George and Cato got along so well was that they were both half Siamese and talked the same language.

"Where'd you find him?" Ben asked.

"Well," Cal said, "after I went to bed last night, I remembered there were two delivery trucks here yesterday morning. I know both the drivers, so I phoned this morning and asked about the cat. Sure enough, the guy who brought the electrical stuff said he'd found this long-legged white cat in the back of his truck. He didn't know where the cat had come from, so he was going to take it to the SPCA."

"If cats weren't so darn snoopy, this would never have happened," I said. "How come you didn't let us know?"

"I figured it would make a nice surprise," Cal said. "Besides, I felt like taking a little run down to Ellis Bay; haven't been there for three or four years." He turned to Derek. "You ready to string a little more wire?"

The two men walked away toward the cottage and Ben and I went back to the kitchen for a restorative second coffee. While I was preparing it, he phoned the neighbors he'd called the night before. I didn't pay much attention until I heard him say, "Cato's a politician, you know. He went out to talk about life and philosophy with the driver of a delivery truck and got so interested in the conversation that he decided to help the driver with the rest of his deliveries."

When Ben was finished, I said, "That's not right. Cato jumped in the back of the truck because he was curious."

"I know." Ben grinned. "But my version makes a better story." He stirred sugar into his coffee. "Cato has made me change my mind about Maggie's cat run, though. I'd hate for her to go through what we did last night."

"She'd have to, if Norma's cats tried to go home. Which they would."

"I'm thinking about it for our crew, too," he said.

"Where would you build that one? The cottage was planned so the cat run would obstruct only three small windows on the west side. There's no place to put one on this house. Besides, George would never forgive you."

Ben sighed. "Yeah, I know. I hate to pen cats up when they're used to freedom."

"I'm torn. They'd be safer penned up, but as far as I can tell, they all stick pretty close to home."

"Let's talk about that later," Ben said. "Right now, I have to decide what I want Derek to harvest and take to the store this afternoon."

George strolled into the kitchen, ears back, Cato at his heels, still explaining. I was so happy

to see them back to normal, I told Ben I'd celebrate by writing a poem.
When the three men came in for coffee, I handed them each a copy.

There are strange things done on a midnight run
By cats who stalk for prey;
The moonlit trails have their secret tales
That should never see light of day;
The slaves of George have seen queer sights,
But the queerest we ever did see
Was at dawn of day, at sun's first ray
When we went to the kitchen for tea.

On the floor below was the latest foe
Of George, the proud marauder;
A nervous wreck and up to his neck
In feline drinking water,
A bright green frog, in a kind of fog
Sat blinking his eyes at me.

Ben read it and frowned. "Holly, are you sure this isn't plagiarism? That sounds like Robert Service."

"Yeah," said Cal, "*The Cremation of Sam McGee*."

"It's not plagiarism," I said. "I stole his meter and rhyme scheme, but the words are all mine. Well, most of them are mine."

Derek said, "I thought you'd write about George and Cato."

"Have more peanut butter cookies, everyone." I handed round the plate. "I do peanut butter cookies really well."

Derek smiled. "Next time use Omar Khayyam. Then you could write something like 'the moving cat sheds, and having shed, moves on'."



Thursday morning was the regular trustees' meeting at the Yellow Duck in Mora Bay. The only things to discuss were final tweaks of the zoning map and written provisions for the community plan, so that we could have them copied in time for the information meeting on Sunday.

We were done shortly after eleven. I was shutting down my laptop and thinking ahead to producing the final documents for the printer when Duff announced that he had news about Trevor's lawsuit.

"Robert Geraghty phoned me yesterday. He says the judge has called a settlement conference for August third. We'll all be getting official notices in the mail, but he thought he should give me a heads-up."

"What's a settlement conference?" Joanna ran a hand through her short gray hair.

"It means Trevor Brentwood and his lawyer, and us and our lawyer, sit around a table with the judge and argue the case," Duff said. "It's done in hope of getting an easy settlement so that it doesn't have to go court. Geraghty says the courts are always booked up months in advance."

"So how come we got a settlement conference so fast?" I asked.

"Apparently some case got withdrawn or they settled out of court or something. Anyway, Geraghty said the judge had a look at the file and decided maybe he could get rid of this one, too."

"What a hope!" I said. "Trevor Brentwood will never give up."

"Where's it being held?" Joanna asked.

"Victoria courthouse," Duff said. "It's set for eleven o'clock, so there'll be no problem about us getting there in plenty of time."

I glanced at the calendar. "That's a Thursday. Two weeks from today. Does Norma have to be there?"

"Everybody does." Duff looked worried. "How's she feeling?"

"I think she'll be all right," I said. "But I'll drive out there and give them the word before I go home."

"Remind Derek about the information meeting, too, would you?"

"Sure," I said. "Though I don't think he's likely to forget, after all the work he did on this presentation." I closed the lid on the laptop. "Either of you up for an early lunch?"

Both Duff and Joanna agreed lunch was a great idea. "Means I can get home early and get a full afternoon of work in," Joanna said.

After Duff took the first sip of his beer, he said, "Did you know a goldfish has a memory span of only three seconds?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Who on earth figured that out? And how did they do it?"

"I'll bet somebody with a sense of humor applied for a government grant to do the research," Joanna said.

I made a mental note to ask Derek if students did that sort of thing in university and then tried to think of a kitty fact to balance Duff's fishy fact. "Did you know that cats have over a hundred vocal sounds?"

"If my income taxes go up next year," Joanna said darkly, "I'll know for sure you two are both getting government grants."



A light, misty rain was falling at noon on Sunday when Derek and I met Duff at the school auditorium. I made a sign with a felt marker and taped it up on one of the big double doors, while the men carried in a stack of maps and documents and spread them out on the edge of the stage.

"We probably won't get too many people this afternoon," Duff said, "but we need to give those who can't make the meeting tonight a chance to ask questions."

"How many envelopes were returned as undeliverable?" I asked. Maps and information sheets had been mailed to all the property owners.

"Only about a dozen," Duff said. "If this rain keeps up, which it won't, we might get a good crowd tonight."

"I'm hoping we get a good crowd whether it rains or not," I said. "This affects everyone, in one way or another."

"Sure it does," Derek said, "but a lot of people will assume there's nothing they can do and, if the sun shines, they'll go swimming instead."

"The forecast I heard at nine this morning was for rain all day," I said.

Duff smiled. "Holly, don't you think weather forecasts are about as good as horoscopes? The

only difference is they talk about temperatures and precipitation instead of meeting tall handsome men. Anyway, your forecast was a good three hours ago. The one I heard at eleven said the rain would clear up this afternoon."

Duff and I left Derek with sandwiches and a couple of books to read while he waited for customers and went our separate ways. I was nervous about the information meeting. The people who agreed with what we'd done would be quiet, but those who thought they had an axe to grind would be extremely vocal. They had a right to be heard, but I could see it being a noisy, confrontational, uncomfortable evening. It would have been nice to see Maggie and Norma there, but Norma couldn't handle going out at night anymore.

Duff turned out to be right about the weather forecast. By the time I got home, the sun was shining and the rain clouds were drifting off to the northeast. I wanted to go for a walk to work off my tension, but the grass was too wet, and I'd never make it down to the beach without the trees showering water all over me.

From the living room window, I could see Ben's shadow moving around in the greenhouse. I had just decided to distract myself by going out there and helping him when there was a knock at the back door.

It was Julia Trafford from across the road. "Do you have eggs on hand, Holly? Something frightened my chickens yesterday and nobody's laying."

"Come in and I'll see what I've got." From the corner of my eye, I saw Shaz scoot under the couch. "Would you like a coffee?"

Julia agreed to coffee, and we spent half an hour comparing notes on my Nicky and her Midnight, a black royal poodle. I wanted her to stay longer but she said she was expecting company and would see me at the meeting.

When Julia had gone, I lay down on the floor and peered under the couch. "Shaz, are you still in there?" She said 'Prrrt?' from a dark corner. "Come out and talk to me, Miss Gorgeous."

She came out at once, a dust bunny clinging to her tail. I could see a few more lurking now that I was lying flat. I supposed I should get the vacuum cleaner and dispose of them but why bother? Only Shaz and I knew they were there.

"What a clever kitten to make such gentle, quiet friends! I bet they agree with every word you say."

Shaz got rid of the dust bunny with an impatient flick of her tail and butted my chin with her forehead. I rose to my knees and began petting her. Then I decided to try something new. I took great handfuls of hair in both hands and pulled gently, moving her skin, all up and down her back. She stretched out, purring loudly.

"You love that, don't you?" I stopped 'ruffing' her and she looked up at me and said, "Meow!" in that imperious tone I understood so well. I began ruffing her again and, after a couple of minutes, she decided she'd had enough and stood up.

I rolled onto my back. She walked up my stomach and sat on my chest, purring, her dark face mask emphasizing her big blue eyes.

"You have your own set of rules, don't you?" I stroked her. "You won't sit on my lap, but if I'm lying down, you think it's all right to walk all over me. Typical feline."

She didn't answer and didn't need to; in my experience, all cats would regard that as a desirable situation. I went on petting her until Ben came in and woke me up and I discovered Miss Gorgeous had abandoned me to sit on the living room windowsill and chirrup at the hummingbirds swooping in to hover at the feeder.

"Shaz likes to be ruffed," I said. "But not the way you've always done George, rubbing him

all over." I explained how I'd pulled her hair.

"I could try that on George, but I don't think it will work. His hair is much shorter than Shaz's. I thought you were going to stay at the school most of the afternoon."

"Duff and I decided it wouldn't be busy, so we left Derek to do that."

Ben gave me his left hand to help me up and took a close look at my face. "Are you nervous about tonight's meeting?"

"It'll be awful, everyone screaming and shouting."

"Come on," he said, "it won't be that bad." He looked at his watch. "Why don't we go have dinner somewhere? A couple of drinks might relax you."

"Might loosen my tongue, too, and I don't want to risk blurting out some snarky comment when I should be quiet."

"I've never seen you slip. Besides, Duff is running the meeting, so you don't have to say anything. I feel like going out, too."

"Okay." It would distract both of us.

As we headed for the back door, Ben took a set of keys off the rack and handed them to me. I handed them back. "Those are the truck keys."

"That's what I want you to drive. Bouncing Blue Betsy has been sitting in the carport for three and a half weeks, ever since I broke my arm. She needs to have a run."

"I hate driving that rattletrap. She never performs for me like she does for you."

Ben grinned. "You know you love a challenge."

We rattled noisily to The Apple Tree and drank a bottle of dry red wine with our lamb shish-kebab and roasted potatoes. It was expensive but worth it and Ben didn't say one single word about it ruining his budget for the month. By the time we left for the school auditorium I was feeling fairly mellow, even about Bouncing Blue Betsy.

When we got out of the truck, I noticed we were next to a black Lexus SUV. Ben eyed it and said, "Who's here from off-island?"

"It looks like the kind of vehicle Trevor Brentwood might own, but I know he drives a Mercedes convertible. I saw it at Norma's."

Ben snorted. "It would be like that bastard to own two expensive cars while his mother is still driving a cheap ten-year-old Ford sedan."

The auditorium was only a third full and I saw Trevor almost at once. I'd been hoping he wouldn't show up, but he was half owner of ten acres on the north side of Rollin RV Park, which itself was owned by Deanna Perry, his wife's sister. They'd no doubt had many discussions about the status of Norma's old property.

The meeting started off all right. Several owners had complaints but seemed satisfied by Duff's explanations about why we'd made our decisions. Sometimes he asked Derek or Joanna to answer a question and I was grateful that he didn't call on me. I felt even better when we got a standing ovation from the audience for all the work we'd done on the community plan.

Trevor Brentwood rose, and my good feelings vanished.

"One of the saddest things about this so-called community plan," he began, "is that the hundred and sixty acres known as the old Brentwood farm have been designated as park and agricultural. This is a criminal waste of land."

I wanted to argue with him but reminded myself that he had a right to his opinion. He was wearing what looked like Ralph Lauren clothes: a tan houndstooth blazer and black cashmere turtleneck. I wondered if he'd worn them to impress the natives, who were mostly wearing jeans, boots, and work shirts, or if he dressed like that all the time.

He went on. "That property, situated as it is on a small bay suitable for a marina, with plenty of waterfront for recreation and meadows easily converted to a golf course, is a glorious opportunity for proper development." He looked around at the audience. "Imagine a first-class hotel overlooking the bay; imagine a marina for small boats, a rolling golf course for relaxation, perhaps a theme park. The land along the waterfront would be ideal for holiday homes."

"What about the old-growth timber on the waterfront?" someone called.

"What about it?" Trevor said. "It would be of far more use as lumber to build homes for people than sitting useless where it is. If people want to look at old-growth timber, there's plenty on the mountain ridge running down the center of the island. I don't see the point to it myself. It's a renewable resource which should be used to benefit people."

"There's been a lot of talk about ecology tonight," Trevor continued, "but none about what's most important to us all. Making a living." He paused for a few seconds. He probably thought it was a dramatic pause which would push his point home. "With proper development of the Brentwood acreage, everybody on this island would benefit. There would be a bigger tax base and higher sales for local stores. Every one of you with a business or who works for a business would end up richer because of it."

An old fisherman in the back stood up. "What's your interest in promoting this land? I'm told you don't own it."

Trevor turned to face him. "The fact that the Islands Trust has its name on the deed is a miscarriage of justice, which I plan to see rectified very soon." He scanned his audience again. "I hope you'll remember what I've said when the bylaw comes up for a vote. It would be a shame, not to mention an economic disaster, to let this valuable property go to the tree-huggers." He sat down.

Duff rose. "Are there any further comments or questions?"

An animated discussion was taking place at the back of the auditorium, but no one responded to Duff's question.

"In that case," Duff said, "I'm adjourning this meeting. Thank you all for coming and thank you for your participation."

Derek said in my ear, as the audience began heading for the exit, stopping in small groups to chat as they went, "Duff does this kind of thing really well. I've learned a few things tonight."

"He's had practice," I said. "And I'm glad he's willing to be front man, because I don't think I could do it. My emotions tend to rule my tongue and if I told you where I'd like to be right now, you'd be shocked."

Derek grinned. "Letting the air out of Trevor's tires?"

That surprised me. "How did you know?"

"Your emotions show on your face, too." He began gathering up leftover maps and other papers. "You seem worried about the effect his speech will have."

"I am. From one particular point of view, he made a lot of sense. He can obviously be very persuasive when he puts his mind to it. If he wins this lawsuit, we are going to be in big trouble."

Scott West, the editor of *The Adriana Advocate* and my boss, appeared at my elbow. He was writing the report of the meeting since I wasn't allowed to, the assumption being that I'd be prejudiced. And I likely would, I thought. Against certain people, anyway.

"The meeting was quite civilized," Scott said. "And this young man" – he put his hand on Derek's shoulder – "acquitted himself very well. He knows his stuff when it comes to our environment and what's good for it."

"He does a good job on house-building and greenhouse-gardening, too," I said.

Scott put his hand against his forehead in mock horror. "Derek, are you actually working at Holly Haven and dealing with two cat-crazy people?"

"Three, actually," Derek said, smiling. "Cal Peterson is working there, too."

"I wouldn't have tagged Cal as cat-crazy," Scott said. "There must be more depth to the man than I thought."

"Scott," I said, "I don't care how much you tease, I'm still upset about Trevor's speech. Do you think it'll influence many people?"

"Holly, you worry too much." Scott patted my shoulder. "You all did a good job tonight and let everyone have their say. The meeting was run fairly and people will remember that, too."

Ben moved to my side. "Ready to head home?"

"I think so. Has Trevor Brentwood gone?"

"Why?" Ben asked.

"If he's still out there in the parking lot, I want to kick him where it'll hurt the most."

Ben winced. "You wouldn't!"

"Yes, I would. Right in his Moroccan leather wallet."



X -- Family Property

The day of the settlement conference dawned clear and warm. Ben and I were up early to feed dog, cats, birds, squirrels, and deer, and start the sprinkler going in the garden. The sun was already hot by the time Cal and Derek arrived to work on the cottage and I had not only second, but third thoughts about wearing a formal skirt, blouse, and shoes, which meant wearing pantyhose as well. Shorts and a sleeveless top seemed more appropriate, but the judge probably wouldn't think so.

I took the car keys off the rack. "I've left sandwiches in the fridge and cookies on the table, so all you have to do is push 'start' on the coffee-maker."

"Give 'em hell!" Cal took off his baseball cap, ran a hand through his graying carrot-red hair. "You think Maggie's going to be okay?"

"If it was just Maggie and Trevor going toe to toe," I said, "Trevor wouldn't have a chance. I'm just afraid she'll express herself too forcibly to suit the judge. You know what she's like when she gets angry."

"Yeah. Hard to stop her once she gets going. But I figure the judge is at least going to believe what she says." Cal took a peanut butter cookie off the plate. "Okay, Derek, let's see if we can get those windows installed today."

"If you leave before we get back," Ben said, "don't forget to put Nicky in the house." When Ben was home, Nicky acted as if he was on an invisible leash and he'd even stick around for Cal or me, but if no one was on the property, he tended to give in to an uncontrollable urge to explore the rest of Adriana.

As I drove to Gordon Bay to pick up Norma and Maggie, Ben said, "My mother will be fine, but I'm worried about Norma. This has to be really rough on her."

"I know. It's hard to imagine being sued by your own son."

She looked thin and frail as she came down the steps, but she smiled as Ben awkwardly helped her into the front seat and fastened her seat belt with his good left hand. He climbed into the back seat with Maggie and we headed for Mora Bay.

"I know you two are worrying," Norma said, "but you don't have to. I've had my home-grown medicine this morning so I'm on a happy little high."

"I should have had some, too," I said.

"Holly!" Ben said. "You wouldn't! It's bad enough my mother being a druggie, without you copying her." But there was a smile in his voice. He'd mellowed a lot in the last couple of years if he could kid around about Maggie smoking the odd joint.

On the ferry, we found Duff, almost a stranger in his navy-blue suit, already in the coffee shop. "Good morning, everyone. It's a lovely day for a trip to the big island."

"Too bad we're not going over there for fun," I said.

Duff eyed our sober faces. "Did you know that a shark is the only fish that can blink with both eyes?"

"No kidding!" Ben said. "You mean the other fish blink with only one eye?"

I shut out the banter, sipped my coffee and tried to concentrate on the tree-clad islands in the Strait and the smooth, sparkling blue water as the ferry engines throbbed below, taking us all too quickly toward Sidney and the short drive into Victoria.

We talked about weather, gardens, and island politics and no one said anything about the settlement conference except Duff. "Robert Geraghty said to let you know we're not supposed to

say anything unless we're asked a direct question."

"That's the way children were brought up when I was young," Maggie said. "You weren't allowed to speak until spoken to." She blew out a breath, like Doran huffing. "I'll do my best to be quiet but no promises. Some things need to be said and if no one else says them, then I will."

The ferry docked on time and soon we were driving south to Victoria. By the time I could see the Olympic Mountains across the strait, my stomach felt like a bundle of knots. I was worried about how Norma was feeling, what Maggie might say, and most of all, what the judge would think about the case. Ben hadn't said a word since we'd left the ferry, so I knew he was worried, too.

As she'd promised, Joanna had taken the ferry from Melfort Island and was waiting for us in the courthouse at quarter to eleven. By the time I'd introduced her to Maggie and Norma, Robert Geraghty arrived, wearing a dark gray suit with a sober tie, and carrying a black briefcase.

"You don't look very cheerful," Maggie said.

He smiled at her. "It's a uniform. Didn't you wear one when you taught school?"

"In the early days, yes."

They chatted for another five minutes, then we were joined by a thin man in tan slacks and a navy blazer, carrying a leather briefcase that looked like it had traveled many miles. Geraghty said, "This is Matt Dilby, representative for the Islands Trust." When the greetings were over, Geraghty said, "All right, let's see if our meeting room is open. By the way, the judge is Alastair Campbell. He looks like he eats small children for breakfast, but I've always found him fair."

The meeting room contained a long, battered oak conference table, with a jug of water, a glass and a note pad placed at one end, where I assumed the judge would sit. Geraghty's description of Judge Campbell was causing the butterflies in my stomach to not just flutter but to zoom frantically round and round.

We hovered uncertainly until Geraghty said, "We sit on one side of the table, the plaintiffs on the other." He took the first chair on the side closest the door, on the judge's left hand. "Since there are eight of us, you'll have to spill around the end of the table."

Trevor Brentwood and his lawyer arrived and slid into place on the other side. Geraghty introduced each of the defendants to Earl Jansen, who was almost flashy, with elegantly waved blond hair and a pale blue suit. I wondered if Vancouver lawyers followed a different style for their 'uniforms.' Trevor looked expensive. I'd have bet all seven of my cats that his soft gray suit was made of silk.

At exactly eleven o'clock, a tall fierce-looking man, with a gaunt face, dark hair graying at the temples and heavy, thick black brows like wings over his eyes, walked in and sat at the head of the table.

"I am Judge Campbell." He assessed each of us with impassive brown eyes. "Counsel will have explained settlement conferences to you, so I won't waste time going into it other than to say my hope is that we can reach an amicable settlement in this room today and avoid taking up three, perhaps four, days of court time." He pulled a file folder out of his briefcase, opened it, and took the cap off his fountain pen. "Please speak clearly." The judge took a sip of water. "Mr. Brentwood, state your case."

Trevor squared his papers in front of him while I mentally wished him a strong attack of laryngitis. "In 1920, my grandfather homesteaded one hundred and sixty acres on Adriana Island. It was all forest then, and it took him five years to build a house and barn and clear enough land for a market garden. In 1925 he married my grandmother and in 1929, my mother, Norma was born."

"Mr. Brentwood," said Judge Campbell, "is all this history necessary?"

"Your Honor, I'm just trying to establish that this has always been family property. I'll try to keep it short." Trevor looked down at his notes. "When my mother married, she and her husband lived with my grandparents. My father and my grandfather cleared land, grew hay, sold timber, and ran a small market garden. When my grandparents died, they left the property, naturally, to my parents. I grew up on that farm."

I glanced at Norma to see how she was reacting, but her face was serene. Maybe she was still a little stoned. I was glad she was discreetly chewing a strong, mint gum so nobody would smell the marijuana on her breath.

Trevor looked around the table. "I was the only child and I assumed, naturally, that my mother would will the farm to me. It is a family asset and, as such, is part of my heritage. However, just under a year ago, she gave the entire property to the Islands Trust." He directed an accusing glance at his mother. "She didn't even have the courtesy to discuss it with me."

"Mr. Dilby?" said Judge Campbell.

The Islands Trust man sat with his hands folded on top of his briefcase, looking perfectly relaxed. "Your Honor, the property was transferred by deed of gift. The instrument was properly drawn up and perfectly legal. We made sure of that when Mrs. Brentwood's lawyer got in touch with us."

Judge Campbell turned back to Trevor. "And your claim is, in brief?"

"That my mother transferred the property while her mind was unbalanced, partly because of the influence of both her friends and Adriana trustees."

"Thank you, Mr. Brentwood," the Judge said. "Mr. Jansen, do you have anything to add to this statement of claim?"

Jansen nodded. "In this society, it is traditional for parents to leave their property to their children. It's part of the responsibility parents assume for making sure their children prosper. In effect, it would appear that Mrs. Brentwood has disinherited her son entirely."

The Judge looked at Norma. "Is that true, Mrs. Brentwood?"

Norma's voice was steady. "No, it isn't. Your Honor, I don't have much to leave, but my will says it all goes to Trevor."

"Old furniture and photographs, I suppose." Trevor looked like he might say more until his lawyer placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"Yes, everything in the house," Norma said, "and whatever I have in the bank. I can't tell you the amount because I may have to spend some on nursing care, but it'll be a few thousand."

"Mr. Brentwood," Judge Campbell said, "the law does say that individuals can do with their own property as they wish."

"Yes, sir," Trevor said, "but family is our most important institution. It isn't fair or just that she transferred the property out of the family."

The Judge turned back to Norma. "You are a widow, Mrs. Brentwood?"

"Yes. Trevor's father died of a heart attack ten years ago."

Judge Campbell looked at Trevor. "Supposing your mother had remarried and left the property to her new husband?"

"Your Honor," Trevor said, "the only acceptable arrangement would have been for her to allow her husband to live on the property until his death. Then the property would have to revert to me as her only blood relative. In my opinion, she has always merely held the property in trust for her children, namely me."

"If your mother had indeed left the property to you, Mr. Brentwood, I take it you would hold

the property in trust for your own children."

Trevor blinked. "My will leaves half my assets to my two sons and half to my wife, any residue to go to my sons when my wife dies."

"That appears to be an equitable arrangement," Judge Campbell said. "But I am referring specifically to these one hundred and sixty acres on Adriana Island. Do you plan to hold it in trust, as you suggest, for your sons? As part of their heritage?"

"Well, not necessarily that exact property, your honor." Trevor shifted in his seat and straightened the papers in front of him. "Since I don't want to farm and neither do my sons, I might very well sell the property. But what I realized from it would certainly be passed to my sons in one form or another."

"I see," Judge Campbell said, raising his black eyebrows. "Then you actually have no sentimental attachment to this piece of land."

"Oh, but your honor, I do! It's family property," Trevor said. He sounded eager and I guessed he was backtracking to cover his error of insisting the property should be held in trust for heirs forever. "As I said, I grew up there. I worked in the garden, baled hay, that sort of thing."

"When your father insisted," Norma said.

Geraghty gave her a warning glance and her face colored.

"Let's examine your contention that your mother's mind was unbalanced when she deeded the land to the Islands Trust," said the Judge. "What proof can you provide that this is true?"

"For one thing," Trevor said, "the fact that she did it. No sane parent would do a thing like that. But I think my contention is amply proved by the fact that my mother is ill and has refused to have standard medical treatment for her cancer. A person who won't take the necessary steps to save her own life must be mentally incompetent."

Judge Campbell's voice was gentle when he asked Norma. "Is this true?"

"Your Honor, it's true that I have cancer," she said, "but it's also true that the cancer is too far advanced to be treated. According to my doctor, it was probably too far advanced even five or ten years ago. I refused chemotherapy and radiation because those treatments won't save my life. They will only make me ill."

"It's a question of quality of life!" Maggie snapped.

"Has this been documented?" the Judge asked Geraghty.

"Yes, your honor." He took half a dozen stapled pages from his briefcase and handed them to the Judge. "These are the lab reports and the doctor's assessment of Mrs. Brentwood's condition."

Trevor began to speak, and Judge Campbell held up his hand. "In a moment, Mr. Brentwood."

When he'd finished reading the report, the Judge nodded at Trevor. "You wished to say something further about this?"

Trevor's face was flushed. "Only that my mother's doctor is an inexperienced medic who obviously couldn't get a job anywhere but a backwoods island. I am a doctor myself and I don't accept that report. She should have been diagnosed and assessed in Victoria or Vancouver, by experts."

The Judge's face softened as he looked at Norma. "I'm sorry to be so blunt, but this report indicates that you have perhaps only two or three months to live. Do you have any regrets about this gift of property to the Islands Trust?"

"None at all. Trevor doesn't need the land. He's a surgeon with a busy practice and he's also

involved in land development around Victoria. He lives in Uplands and takes at least two vacations a year."

"To places like Europe and Costa Rica," Maggie added, ignoring my worried look.

"Did you consider leaving the property to your grandsons?" Judge Campbell asked.

"For a long time, I thought that's what I would do," Norma said. "But they're both in college, preparing for careers that will take them all over the world. They'll never live on Adriana. And I was afraid Trevor would talk them into letting him develop the property as a commercial venture."

"I take it you have objections to the property being developed," the Judge said.

"Your Honor, I have two reasons for doing what I did," Norma said. "One is that I love the land the way it is, and I don't want to see it change. The other is that the Gulf Islands are still relatively unspoiled and I think it's important to keep them that way."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brentwood," said the Judge. "Now, let's deal with the other defendants. Mr. Kinnear, did you attempt to influence Mrs. Brentwood to deed her property to the Islands Trust?"

Duff unclasped his hands from his ample belly and leaned forward. "Never. I had no idea that she was considering it and didn't know she'd done it until I heard about the transfer from the secretary of the Islands Trust."

"Ms Karl?"

Joanna said, "I live on Melfort Island, and am the third trustee for Adriana, so I know almost no one on Adriana except the other two trustees. I'd never met or talked to Mrs. Brentwood until today."

"Mr. Sutton?"

Ben shook his head. "I've known Norma Brentwood almost since the day we moved to Adriana, a little over five years ago, but I've never discussed her property with her."

"Mrs. Sutton?"

"I suggested she give it to the Islands Trust long before I became a trustee, but that was only because she didn't want her son to have it once she found out he planned to build a hotel and marina and various other things on the land."

"Which is the only fit use for it," snapped Trevor.

Judge Campbell's eyebrows contracted into a frown. "Mr. Brentwood, please don't interrupt." The Judge looked at me again. "Mrs. Sutton, did you try to persuade Mrs. Brentwood to give the property to the Islands Trust?"

"No, I didn't. I made the suggestion, that's all, as an option she might consider. It was her property. It was up to her to decide what to do with it."

Judge Campbell's gaze moved to Maggie. "Now, Mrs. Sutton Senior, did you try to influence Mrs. Brentwood to will the property away from her son?"

"I certainly did!" Maggie said. "Trevor has treated his mother abominably and he doesn't deserve to have something so beautiful, especially when he means to ruin it."

The Judge raised his eyebrows and leaned back in his chair. It seemed to me that he was trying not to smile, but it may have been wishful thinking because I was afraid Maggie was too outspoken. "What did Mr. Brentwood do that annoyed you so much?"

Maggie huffed as expressively as Doran. "He got two of his psychiatrist friends to come over for a weekend to stay at Norma's place, ostensibly so they could go fishing. But what they actually did was follow us around the whole time, chatting and asking questions. We came to the conclusion that Trevor was trying to have his mother declared incompetent so he could assume

control of her affairs."

"That's a lie!" Trevor snapped. His face was beet red now and his hands clenched into fists. "I was worried about her health, that's all."

Judge Campbell's eyebrows beetled at Trevor. "Mr. Brentwood, I won't warn you again."

"Your Honor," Earl Jansen said, "Mrs. Sutton's conclusion as to Mr. Brentwood's motives is merely fantasy, not fact." He glanced at Trevor, frowning.

Robert Geraghty pulled more paper out of his briefcase. "Your Honor, I subpoenaed the statements made by the two psychiatrists concerned. Both say that they assessed Mrs. Brentwood as perfectly sane and mentally competent."

Trevor's face was almost purple, his jaw rigid, his mouth opening and shutting. Jansen's hand closed around Trevor's wrist, but he was looking upset, too, and I made a bet with myself that Trevor hadn't told him about the psychiatrists. I wondered how much Trevor had paid them for that weekend. It was obvious that at this moment Trevor was wishing he'd never even met them.

Geraghty handed copies of the statements to Judge Campbell and Earl Jansen. The judge read the statements and made some notes. Then he placed his palms flat on the table and said, "The situation is this: if I judge that there is no reasonable claim or no reasonable defense and no issues that need to be decided at trial, the law permits me to decide the case before me and make an order in favor of either the claimant or defendant."

Trevor looked like he was holding his breath. I know I was.

The Judge continued. "I have made such a decision. Mr. Brentwood, I judge your claim to be unreasonable and, in fact, verging on the frivolous."

Earl Jansen looked startled, opened his mouth, then shut it again.

The judge said, "This case is dismissed."

Trevor jumped to his feet, almost knocking over his chair. "You haven't heard the last of this!"

"Mr. Brentwood!" Earl Jansen looked almost as fierce as the judge.

Judge Campbell glowered. "Mr. Brentwood, I would strongly suggest you be more circumspect in your use of language. I used the word 'frivolous' intentionally. Any lawyer or court looking at reopening this case will note that word in my decision. Your claim has wasted everyone's time and would do so again if it ever came to trial."

"I have a *right* to that land!" Trevor, followed by Jansen, turned and charged out the door. I listened to their footsteps thumping down the hallway and Trevor's voice, rising in pitch, then silenced by a door closing.

The silence lasted only a few seconds. I looked around at everyone. They were all, except for Norma, smiling. And only now, with my legs suddenly feeling like spaghetti, did I realize how truly frightened I'd been.

The Judge looked at Norma as he rose, and said, "Mrs. Brentwood, I offer you my sympathy. You were in a difficult position. But, most of all, I would like to say that whatever your motives, you committed an act of extreme social generosity."

Then Norma did smile. "Thank you, Your Honor." She was on her feet, too, along with the rest of us. She accepted a hug from Maggie and held on to the back of her chair. "I just hope this is the end of it. I want to spend my last days in my garden, at peace."

The Judge left and the rest of us went outside and stood on the courthouse steps. I could tell by Ben's face that he was feeling both dazed and relieved, like me. Maggie looked triumphant. Robert Geraghty was calm but smiling.

I said to him, "Why wasn't the conference taped? Shouldn't we all get a copy of it?"

He shook his head. "Settlement conferences are always off the record. This is so people will feel free to speak their minds and to offer compromises, which they wouldn't do if it could be thrown in their faces later." Geraghty congratulated us on our success, shook hands and left with the Islands Trust representative, Matt Dilby. We six Adriana Islanders wandered down to the sidewalk.

"We need to have a little celebration." Duff patted his stomach. "Let's go get lunch and a drink somewhere before we go home."

"Wonderful idea," I said. "Let's make it a big celebration and have two drinks. Are you up for this, Norma?"

"Definitely," she said. "I haven't been to Victoria for a long time. I wouldn't mind staying a bit longer." She turned to Maggie. "Do you think the animals will be all right? They'll wonder where we are."

"They'll be fine." Maggie's voice was firm.

Deciding on a restaurant took another few minutes, but by one-thirty we were ensconced at a round table in Milestone's, on the inner harbor.

After our drinks came, Ben said to Norma, "You did a great job in that meeting, though I imagine the victory is kind of bittersweet."

"No," she said, "it's all sweet. I've had my years of being bitter about the way Trevor turned out and about his treatment of me, but I accepted months ago that he is the way he is and there's nothing I can do about it. All I can deal with is my own stuff. I'm just so happy that my land will be preserved the way it is."

"So are we all." Duff led a toast to the judge. "Do you think he knew Trevor before this meeting?"

"I doubt it," I said, "but he'd have heard of him. Ben and I lived here in Victoria for a long time and it's still more small town than city when it comes to gossip. Trevor likes to be noticed, so he golfs at Uplands, appears at charity events and, if my former co-worker is right, he's the spokesman for the various real estate developments he's involved with."

"So, the judge probably had some idea about the kind of man he was dealing with." Joanna buttered a piece of bread.

"I would think so," Duff said, "but he couldn't let anything he'd heard influence him. Judges have to decide cases on the facts, you know."

"Well," said Ben, "Trevor certainly revealed his true character in that meeting. I wonder if he thought we couldn't see through that malarkey about his family history and the land being his heritage."

Maggie huffed again. "I'm sure he thinks he's smarter than everybody else. I felt a lot of satisfaction in seeing him get his comeuppance today."

"So did I," Joanna said, "but I doubt if one setback like this will change him. He'll probably go on being greedy and manipulative."

"Yes," said Maggie, "and I'd be willing to lay a wager that somewhere down the road, other things he's done will come back to bite him in the ass."

"Mother!" Ben said.

"What?" Her eyes were twinkling. "What did I say?"

At that point our meals arrived, and I realized I was ravenous. Before I could tuck into my Thai noodle salad, though, I had to cut up Ben's steak. He said, sheepishly, "I got so interested in the proceedings, that when we ordered, I forgot my arm is still in a sling."

We went on talking about the meeting and our impressions of Judge Campbell and the two lawyers right through lunch and, by the time dessert and coffee arrived, I thought everyone had sorted out their thoughts on the new reality. Defragging, I thought. Just like defragging a computer.

As we were walking out to the parking lot, Duff said, "Did you know the winter of 1932 was so cold that Niagara Falls froze completely solid?"

Ben said, "That must mean the river froze completely, too. It's amazing to think of the immense flow of water in that big river being solid ice."

"If Duff is delving into his storehouse of weird facts," Joanna said, "it's time we all went home. I should make it just in time to feed my dog before he thinks I've deserted him and goes begging at the neighbor's."

"And I miss my cats," Norma said.

"See you on the twentieth." Joanna got into her car.

"Back to trustee business, I guess," Duff said. "Now we have to get that bylaw for the community plan organized and passed."

"Duff," I said, "did you know that petting a cat has actually been proven to help in lowering one's blood pressure?"

He shook his head. "Cats are far more complex than I thought." He unlocked his car door. "I can't compete with you on cat facts, Holly, but perhaps I can dig up a fact or two about dogs."

"That would be nice, Duff," I said. "Ben, let's see if we can catch the four o'clock ferry. I'm ready to pet a few cats, too. Maybe even a dog. Nicky will have missed us."

"Yes, let's go home," Ben said. "I don't want to get caught in the heavy traffic."

"I'll bet you can't guess what I'm going to do when I get home," Norma said, as Ben buckled her seat belt for her.

"I'll bet I can," he said, smiling.

"I'm going to sit out in my sunny garden," Norma said, with considerable satisfaction, "and look at my vegetables growing. I might even smoke another joint to celebrate."



XI -- Killing String

By the end of the following week, the doors and windows had been installed in the cottage and Cal reported, when he stuck his head in the back door Friday morning, that they were almost finished the drywalling.

Ben tossed a piece of breakfast ham at Nicky and said, "The place is really taking shape now. We'd better go to Mora Bay and look at light fixtures and floor coverings. My mother will have to pick out kitchen cupboards, too. I forgot those might need to be ordered ahead of time. Do you want to do that today?"

"I'll leave it up to you and Maggie. I remember making several thousand decisions every day when we were renovating this house and I'm not keen on getting back into the 'what if' discussions." In fact, I was so dead set against getting involved I was prepared to join Shaz under the couch.

"But I can't drive," Ben said, as Nicky nudged his elbow, looking for more ham. George was sitting in my lap and sniffing at my bowl, obviously trying to understand why anyone in their right mind, even a human, would eat short grain brown rice and fresh blackberries for breakfast.

"Maggie can drive. I'll take you over to Norma's and have a visit with her while you and your mother fight with the building supply store. I haven't seen Norma since the settlement conference."

Ben sighed. I knew he was disappointed that I wouldn't act as arbitrator between him and his mother. But I'd taken a leaf from Norma's book of rules. Maggie and Ben were adults and therefore capable of working out their own problems. I'd also promised myself I wouldn't get involved until it came time to paint. Painting was messy and hard work, but I found it mentally relaxing to focus on just one thing at a time and it was a pleasure to see fresh color cover a multitude of sins.

"Well," Ben said, "I suppose if we have to wait for materials, Cal and Derek can paint the siding and put up the cat run."

It was a relief to get through morning coffee. Cal and Derek wouldn't talk about anything except motorcycles and Ben tried to convince me that choosing light fixtures was fun. With a stew on the stove and a fresh pot of coffee ready to go, I was happy to leave Holly Haven to its fate and gossip with Norma.

After Maggie and Ben left for Mora Bay in Norma's car, I put the teapot and cups on a tray and followed Norma out to the garden seat, trying not to let it bother me that she looked noticeably thinner and frailer than she had just a week before. I also noticed that the potholes in her driveway had been filled in and the flower beds in front of the house had been weeded, which made me wonder if she was overdoing things. "How are you feeling? Are you taking proper care of yourself?"

"I'm having more pain, but it's not bad as long as I take my medication."

"Pills or joints?"

"Both now," she said. "It's all right, Holly. I knew it was coming. Dr. Giles visits me every week and he's very good about explaining what's happening inside my body and helping me do things my way. He says he's teaching me how to kick the oxygen habit."

I had to laugh. "Dr. Giles never uses black humor with Ben."

"He's a good judge of character, I think. He can guess Ben wouldn't think remarks like that are funny; he's too worried about getting old." She took the cup of tea I handed her. "My cats are

wonderful nurses, too."

"What do they do?"

"Smoke stays with me in bed. He usually has one paw on my arm and his head on my shoulder and he purrs and purrs." Norma took a sip of tea. "And you might not believe this, Holly, but when he leaves, either Blue Eyes or Doran comes and takes his place."

"That's amazing."

"Dr. Giles thinks so, too. When he arrived yesterday, Doran stood on the bed with his tail all fluffed out and hissed at him. It took me a couple of minutes to convince the Bad Boy that the doctor is a friend."

"Cats are temperamental, exasperating, noisy, selfish, domineering egotists," I said, "but they're so funny you can't help loving them. And so darn smart that I can't help thinking they'd run the world if they could speak and use computers."

"Just imagine if they did run the world," Norma said. "They'd be sure to have catnip farms. Mouse farms, too."

"Of course they would!" It was a relief to have a topic that wasn't painful. "And in no time, they'd find out that wild mice have a better flavor than farmed mice and one of them, probably my Cato, would be campaigning to shut down the mouse farms."

Norma laughed. "You never know, they might turn out to be smarter than humans. Sometimes I think they already are. They certainly run my life."

"Mine, too." I told her about my method of ruffing Shaz. "Now she's insisting on having a five-minute ruff every morning and she won't leave me alone until she gets it. Cal calls her a slut because she likes to lie on her back and get her tummy rubbed, too."

"Does she go back under the couch when you're through?"

"Only if Cal and Derek are there."

As if aware that we were admiring the feline species, Doran roused himself from the shade of the greenhouse and came over, carrying his plume of a tail like a banner. He jumped up on the seat and nuzzled Norma's pocket.

"Oh, he wants to kill string." She pulled a length of white string out of her pocket and handed it to me. "You try it. He might like someone new to play the game with him."

I pulled the string down the row of carrots, through the beets and back to the garden seat, with Doran pouncing and killing the string every four or five feet. I let this tiny, fierce, gray-and-white lion chew on his catch for a minute or two before reviving it to run again.

"You do that very well," Norma said.

"I've had lots of practice. George used to do this by the hour. Now Cato, Caesar and Poppy ask for it all the time, though they spend more time arguing about who's entitled to the prey than they do actually catching it." I followed my string-killing route again while Doran frisked after me and Norma laughed at his antics.

The next time I stood still, tossed the end of the string into the turnips and pulled it toward me. Doran raced after it so fast that he didn't watch where he was going and crashed into my leg. He stepped backwards, shaking his head, and I made the mistake of laughing. He turned his back on me and stalked away toward the house. "Do you think he'll forgive me?"

"He'll have forgotten about it by the next time you come, but he probably won't talk to you again today." Norma poured us each another cup of tea. "A bit like Trevor. He hasn't phoned or visited since the settlement conference."

I started to express sympathy, then decided perhaps she didn't need it. "Does it bother you that he's staying away?"

"No, I'm relieved. I know he won't change, which means we'd be in conflict every moment if we talked, and I don't want that. I don't have much time left, Holly, and I want every moment to be filled with sunshine and flowers and cats and good friends who don't tell me what to do."

"Then should I hope for no rain?"

Norma smiled. "Rain is all right. It's part of the natural world. Though I do like to sit out here as much as I can." She pulled a joint out of her other pocket and lit it. "Now that Trevor lost his case, I guess we can all relax about this property staying as it is."

For a moment I hesitated. Should I tell her there was still danger that her plans would go awry? Would it be cruel to make her worry? But Norma liked to know the truth and she was an adult, entitled to know where she stood. She knew she'd done all she could, and I didn't think she'd fall into the trap of worrying about something that was out of her control.

"That was a major victory," I said. "But there is still danger that something could go wrong. The trustees have to prepare the bylaw that makes the community plan legal and enforceable. And we have to do it while we're still in office."

"There won't be another trustee election for fourteen months."

"I know, but these meetings and public hearings take so much time. And we're not out of the woods until the bylaw is passed."

"What could happen?" Norma asked. "The Islands Trust owns the property now."

"But they have to follow what the majority of islanders want," I said. "If the bylaw doesn't pass, it means we have to start over on the community plan. If somebody in favor of development, like Deanna Perry, gets elected, the zoning for this property could change completely. And, if that happens, I'm sure Trevor would make an offer to the Trust for the land. And I can imagine circumstances where they'd accept it because they need money to do something else."

Norma was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head. "No, that isn't going to happen. The bylaw will pass, and the Heritage Society will take over this house. It's all going to be fine; I know it is."

"All right. I'll take your word for that, but I'm not going to rest easy until the paperwork is done."

"Holly, you worry too much."



Ben and Maggie came home mid-afternoon, the back of the car stuffed with light fixtures and four gallons of white primer.

"Oh, good," I said. "This means I can put the base coat on the whole interior."

"I'm glad you're thrilled," Ben growled. "I've got to go reconstruct my shattered budget." He went off to the house, holding his broken arm high so that Nicky, bouncing around his legs, couldn't reach up far enough to pull on it.

"Was it that bad?" I asked Maggie, as we carried boxes and the paint into Ben's workshop.

"Not really. We ordered kitchen cabinets in a light oak finish and they turned out to be the second cheapest, so Ben was happy about that. He wasn't so pleased about the flooring, though." She stopped and stared at the windows. "Those are filthy."

"I know, but Ben won't let me clean them."

"Why ever not?"

"St. Francis says if the glass is clean, little birds will mistake it for clear air, crash into it and

kill themselves."

Maggie shook her head, then went on with her story. "I decided on hardwood for the floors," she said. "At least I suppose it's wood. It's that laminate stuff and supposed to be easy to install. I think cat hair will be a lot easier to vacuum off a wood floor than off carpet. And tile for the kitchen, of course."

"I think that's great. I wish we had laminate in our house. I seem to spend a lot of time vacuuming cat fur off carpets. What color tile did you get?"

"It's a rich, reddish terra cotta, called Fire Dance." Maggie closed the trunk of the car. "The laminate was more expensive than carpet, but I think what really upset Ben was the paint."

"But there are only four gallons, though I know we'll need more."

Maggie smiled. "But it's sixty dollars a gallon. Ben kept saying it was only thirty when you renovated your house. Apparently, he thought paint was so cheap he didn't need to bother putting it in his budget."

"Oh, dear, I'll be hearing about this for a while."

Maggie got into the driver's seat. "I took a lot of paint chips so we can decide on colors," she said, "but I don't have time to look at them in the cottage right now. Cal's coming over for supper tonight and I need to get home and get the roast in the oven."

"Before you go, I want to ask you something. Is Norma working too hard? Are you? Because I noticed this morning that someone had filled in the potholes in the driveway."

"We didn't do that. It was the island elves."

"What elves? What are you talking about?"

Maggie put the car in reverse and began to back up. "Call me on the weekend."

An hour later, Cal and Derek appeared at the back door. "The drywall is all done and sanded," Cal said.

Ben came out of his office, where he'd been communing with his calculator. He looked grumpy and I decided using a calculator left-handed must be as tough as doing anything else left-handed when you were a right-handed person. "Did you have time to vacuum up the drywall dust?"

"All done," Cal said. "What do you want us to do Monday?"

"I thought you might be willing to work tomorrow," Ben said.

Cal shook his head. "Can't. I have to go to Victoria on the first ferry tomorrow and I'll be over there Sunday, too."

Ben sighed. "Okay. Monday it is. I guess you might as well paint the siding and get started on the cat run. I bought two-by-fours, four-by-fours, and a few rolls of wire mesh today. That's supposed to be delivered Monday."

Cal and Derek wished us a good weekend and headed up the driveway. I wanted to know why Cal had decided to spend two days in Victoria but since he hadn't volunteered the information, politeness prohibited me from asking.

The next few days went by swiftly. I put on my grubby old painting jeans and shirt and spent most of my time in the cottage with paint and a long-handled roller. The slowest part of the job was taping the door and window frames and cutting in where ceiling met wall, but it was very satisfying to watch the paint roll on. With the doors and windows all open and the sun shining in, the little house was so bright and cheerful I almost envied Maggie her new home. Outside, Derek painted the siding. Cal fussed with footings for the four by fours which constituted the corners of the cat run and leveled the ground so he could frame the bottom as well as the top. By the time I finished the base coat on the interior, he'd installed a screen door from the yard into the run and

installed a cat flap in the inside door which led from the laundry and mud room into the run.

"Gotta build a little landing and a couple of steps down," Cal said, "so Maggie can come out and play with the cats right from the house, instead of going out the back door into the car port and then around and in through the screen door."

"Too bad those trees weren't situated so we could include a couple in the run," I said. I liked watching cats climb trees.

"Better this way," Cal said. "If the trees were inside, we'd have to nail the wire to the trunks so the cats couldn't get out that way. Trees grow, so that would mean refastening the wire when it pulled loose."

"Not only that," Derek said, "but putting nails into a tree doesn't do it any good."

"Maggie wasn't happy about it," Cal added, "but I promised I'd build a couple of cat trees from scrap lumber. I'll put good-sized platforms on top. I know cats like sitting up high so they can see what's going on."

"Are you going to put a roof on the run?"

"You bet. If I don't, Maggie will complain about the cats being rained on. There's enough plywood and roofing to do it. If not, I've got some stuff at my place."

"How was your trip to Victoria?" I asked casually.

"Real good," Cal said, "real good." He pushed his cap back, ran his hands through his hair, and settled the cap back into place. "Maggie says Norma wants to come and see the cottage again."

When Maggie and Norma arrived the next morning, Ben and I walked over to the cottage with them, one of us on either side of Norma for support. Both women exulted over the skeleton of the cat run.

"That's perfect," Maggie said.

Norma nodded. "Doran is going to hate it for the first while, though. He doesn't like being penned up and you know what he's like when he doesn't get his own way."

Cal interrupted his task of building the steps from the laundry room down into the cat pen and said, "He'll get used to it. I'll build the trees and put the wire on next, so this part will be finished before we go back to working inside. I might get the pen roof done next week, too. We're still waiting for the cupboards and the flooring, anyway."

We went in the back door, beside the carport. The interior was bright, though bare, and Maggie could obviously imagine what it would be like when it was finished. She twirled around, a smile on her face.

Norma was smiling, too. "It's beautiful, Maggie. My babies are going to love it."

By the time they'd looked at every room and exclaimed over the view of the Strait, Norma reached for an old wooden chair that occasionally stood in for a ladder and sank onto it. "I think I've overdone the walking," she said.

Ben patted her shoulder. "I wish this damned arm of mine was healed," he said. "I could carry you back to the car."

"Well, you didn't really mean to fall off the roof." Maggie stuck her head out the back door. "Cal!"

Cal wiped his hands on his jeans and picked up Norma as though she were a child. "Put your arm around my neck. I'll tell you one thing; you're a hell of a lot easier to carry than a goat."

The laughter got us past an awkward patch and in a couple of minutes Cal deposited Norma in the front seat of her car. "There you go. You gonna manage okay when you get home, or do you want me to come along?"

"I'll be all right." Norma smiled. "It's just that I've got to where I can't do much at one time. I do my weeding in ten-minute stints."

As Maggie got into the car, I said, "Did Cal enjoy his weekend in Victoria?"

She smiled and started the engine. "He said it was fantastic. See you later, Holly."

Thwarted again, I decided it was time to give Ben his surprise. After Maggie and Norma had gone and we went in to make coffee, I said, "Dr. Giles phoned this morning when you were out in the greenhouse."

I knew by the way his eyes lit up that he was crossing his fingers mentally, maybe physically, too, that it was time for the cast to come off his arm.

"Well?" he said.

"You're to go see him Friday, and probably get the cast off. Provided that it's healed properly."

Ben beamed. "Well, it's about time! It'll be great to have the use of both arms again." He went on for five minutes about how good life would be and how many things he could catch up on.

On Friday, when Dr. Giles had taken the cast off with his special saw, Ben was, of course, disappointed to hear that, while his arm was doing fine, it would be another couple of months before he could consider it healed. In the meantime, he would have to go for physiotherapy treatments three times a week.

Dr. Giles looked at Ben's stormy face and said, "Ben, you cannot use that arm in a normal fashion for a while yet. Just be grateful you can now dress yourself and cut up your dinner. Oh yes, and use a pen with your right hand."

"But..." Ben said, as he flexed the arm. "Oh, I see. It doesn't work very well."

"No, and it won't for a while. The physiotherapist will give you some weight-bearing exercises to do. Follow her advice, please. In the meantime, treat it gently and don't go trying to hammer nails or carry buckets of chicken feed."

"Can I drive?"

"Certainly not that old pickup." Dr. Giles had experienced the dubious pleasure of riding in Bouncing Blue Betsy the day his own car broke down and Ben gave him a lift into Mora Bay. "Maybe you can drive the car in another week or so. Ask the physiotherapist. She'll test your arm for strength and range of motion and advise you accordingly."

"I hate being helpless."

"What you'd hate even worse is damaging that arm so that it doesn't heal properly and end up crippled for the rest of your life."

Ben sighed. "Okay, I'll behave. At least now I can tie my own shoelaces." He looked at the doctor. "I can, can't I?"

"Yes," Dr. Giles said. "Look, Ben, people have accidents and break bones all the time. It's painful, annoying and inconvenient, more so for some than others, but it's not permanent. Give it the proper healing time and you'll be good as new."

"I know you're right." Ben sighed. "But it's hard to remember that when I can't do any of the things I usually do. It just feels like I'm going to be like this forever."

"If you were eighty instead of sixty, a health problem might very well last forever. Like arthritis, for example. That's something you have to live with for the rest of your life, no matter what age you are when it strikes."

It was a relief that Dr. Giles was arguing all these points. I could have said much the same things, but Ben wouldn't have listened to me.

Ben was silent for a moment. "Sorry. I guess I've been a pain about this. Haven't I, Holly?"
"Some of the time," I said.

"I'll try to get past it. I get frequent reminders that I'm basically a lucky guy. The reminders work for an hour and then I go back to being annoyed because my body can't do what I want it to, what it's always done in the past."

"Welcome to 'over the hill,' Ben." Dr. Giles grinned.

Ben's head snapped up. "Like hell! I'm not over the hill yet."

Unperturbed, Dr. Giles said, "Take care of yourself properly and you may not see that hill until you're eighty. You'll definitely see it by the time you're ninety."

"Yeah," Ben said. "Okay. It's a good thing I'm only eleven."



On Sunday, August twentieth, Duff and Joanna arrived at ten for our regular monthly trustees' session. I'd phoned and asked them to come to my house so Joanna could meet Nicky and the cats. I knew she was a dog person and, if she wasn't keen on cats, perhaps mine would be able to convert her in the space of a couple of hours. I was fond of the Yellow Duck, but a change might make my next beer and hamburger there taste even better.

Joanna was impressed with Nicky, who met her in the driveway as she was getting out of Duff's car and showed her that he was willing to do anything she wanted: shake a paw, lick her face or dance around, grinning like a silly fool.

"Purebred Samoyed?" she asked.

"I believe so, though we didn't bother getting papers. Ben wanted a dog as companion and planned to train him to keep deer out of the garden."

"I understand they're hard to train."

"Almost impossible," I said. "But he's so good-natured and so much fun, it's truly impossible not to love him."

"Did he ever chase deer out of the garden?" Duff asked.

"No, he rounded them up and kept them in a tight little circle, no matter where they were, in Ben's garden or down in the meadow. Once the deer learned that he's just a comedian, they simply jumped over top of him to get where they wanted to go."

Ben came out of his greenhouse, shook hands like a normal person, grinning like a fool himself, and followed us in for his midmorning break. We sat around the kitchen table for twenty minutes, while various cats came in to inspect these new people and find out if they were worth cultivating.

When George sat down a few feet away and stared at her, Joanna said, "That one looks like he's doing an inspection. Is he the leader?"

"That is King George the Magnificent, ruler of all he surveys. So yes, he's a leader. That little Siamese at the food bowls" – I pointed at Kaylie – "thinks she's going to depose him one day soon, but you know what they say: old age and treachery will overcome youth and skill. At least I hope they will. Much as I love Kaylie, she can be so demanding at times that I'd like to smack her myself."

On the other side of the table, Ming sat looking at Duff, who was looking back, a worried expression on his face. "Holly, are you sure this cat isn't going to attack me?"

Weighing in at twenty-four pounds and with all those lethal claws, Ming could probably make mincemeat of Duff in no time. "He's the gentlest of our cats, Duff. He's a caretaker and a

worrier. When his five kittens were small, he had a nervous breakdown because he couldn't keep track of them all."

Duff looked amazed. "Really?"

"Really. Why don't you pet the top of his head? He likes that."

Duff put down a tentative hand and gingerly stroked Ming's head. Ming purred. Duff gave me a startled glance. "He's purring!"

"I told you he likes being petted."

I noted that Duff put his hand down to pet Ming again while I explained to Joanna that chatty Cato was the result of Kaylie's illicit affair and Ben explained to her that Poppy was trying to stick her head in his armpit because she liked his deodorant so much.

"They're certainly interesting little guys," Joanna said. "I've sometimes thought I'd like to have a cat, but my dog hates them."

"It's best to have the cat first," Ben said, "then bring a puppy into the house. George had Nicky whipped into shape pretty fast. Nicky knows that cats rule."

Ben went back to the greenhouse and the rest of us went into the living room, where I had my laptop set up on a small table by my chair.

"So," Duff said, "the next thing we have to do is have a public hearing for the community plan."

"It seems like the information meeting did the same thing," I said. "Do you think anybody will come?"

"It doesn't matter if they do or not." Joanna put down her second cup of coffee. "We trustees have the authority to decide how land will be used and we're the only ones who get to vote on whether to accept the plan as it stands. Of course, our vote won't mean a thing if the landowners don't pass the bylaw that makes it legal."

"Then what's the purpose of having a public hearing?" I asked.

"Just like the name implies," Duff said. "People have received all the information by mail, and they had the chance to discuss it and offer suggestions at the information meeting. At the public hearing, they'll make final presentations and arguments. At the end of the hearing, we three will vote. You never know, somebody might come up with an idea that is so good we'll all vote against the present plan and have to come up with a revised one."

I groaned. "And then we'd have to go through all the meetings again."

"Of course," Duff said, "that's democracy. But I doubt there'll be any changes."

"I doubt it, too," Joanna said. "We've done a thorough job on this community plan, and I think most people agree. There'll always be people who prefer anarchy but they're not a majority."

There was a startled grunt from Duff, and I looked up from the keyboard to see Ming had jumped into his lap. "Just relax, Duff. Give him a pet or two and he'll settle down in your lap. That's if you don't mind. If you do, I'll remove him."

Duff didn't look at all relaxed. "Well, I'll try it. I don't understand why he's doing this."

"It's because he likes you. And that's a compliment. Even cats as laid-back as Ming don't like everybody." I'd spent enough time with Duff now to know that he was a pushover and Ming probably sensed it, too, but no man wants to be told he's a soft touch, so I kept quiet.

Ming knew what he was doing. He sprawled across Duff's lap and purred. I could see the tenseness in Duff's shoulders gradually ease. Duff petted the cat a couple of times and, when he stopped, Ming looked up into Duff's face and nudged his hand. When Duff petted him again, he purred louder.

Duff started to smile. "He really does like me."

"We need to decide on a date for the public hearing," Joanna said. "It has to be advertised in *The Adriana Advocate*."

I looked at my calendar. "What about September ninth? That's a Saturday."

"Sounds good to me." Duff seemed quite relaxed now. So did Ming.

Joanna said, "I'll email you a copy of the notice we used on Melfort. You can just alter it to fit Adriana and give it to Scott to put in the paper."

We had just dealt with the last of the correspondence when Joanna gasped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Something batted my ankle."

I knew right away who'd done that. Joanna was sitting on Shaz's couch. "It's all right, that's just Shaz, a Ragdoll kitten who hides under that couch when there are strangers in the house. Come out, Shaz and say hello nicely."

Shaz slowly emerged and batted her blue eyes at Joanna.

"Oh, she's gorgeous!" Joanna exclaimed. "I've never seen such a beautiful cat. Will she sit on my lap?"

"No," I said, "nor does she like to be picked up. She's strictly an ankle surfer."

Joanna reached down and petted Shaz, who promptly rolled on her back. "Oh, she likes her tummy rubbed." Joanna was now down on her knees, adoring at Shaz's shrine.

I showed Joanna how to do the special ruff that Shaz liked, and Shaz returned the adoration with loud purring and an occasional little squeak that indicated her bliss was simply too much to be contained.

"She's obviously operating under cover," Duff said. "There must be some sinister organization that wants to know what happens at trustee meetings."

"Shaz is well suited to the spy trade," I said. "Did you know that a cat's hearing is much stronger and more sensitive than a dog's or a human's? Our hearing stops at twenty kilohertz; a cat's at sixty-five kilohertz."

Duff gave Ming a pat and shifted in the chair. Ming knew when laps were about to disappear and got down on his own. He walked over to the cat bunk beside the hall door and curled up in the bottom bunk.

"I'm beginning to see that cats are more than just balls of fur," Duff said. "But dogs are brave. Did you know that during the second World War, the Russians trained dogs to run suicide missions with mines strapped to their backs?"

"Cats would never be that stupid," I said.



XII -- Neural Pathways

I had just finished vacuuming the house the following Saturday morning, forcing the feline population to evacuate in order to escape the racket, when I heard a motorcycle in the driveway. I hurried to the kitchen window, wondering why Derek had decided to visit on a day off. Hadn't he said that he was going to the big island for the weekend?

Nicky began barking and I realized it couldn't be Derek; Nicky knew the sound of his motorbike. I glanced out the kitchen window. This bike was much bigger than Derek's and there were two people getting off, both wearing shiny black helmets, black leather jackets, boots, and gloves.

I dashed out the back door and met Ben, coming from the greenhouse to investigate, as the two riders removed their helmets.

Cal and Maggie!

I grinned in delight, but Ben glowered. "Mother, what in hell do you think you're doing on that thing?"

"Learning something new, Benjamin. Cal learned how to drive 'this thing' and picked me up this morning for my first ride."

So that's where Cal had been when he left early on Friday. "It can't have been a surprise," I said, "since you obviously had time to go buy all that new gear."

Ben stomped around, glaring first at the bike, then at Cal. "I suppose you have a license to drive this thing?"

"Sure do." Cal grinned at me. "Took driving lessons in Victoria over a few weekends. That's where I was the weekend you were so curious about." He stood back and waved a hand at the bike. "She's a Harley. Isn't she a beauty?"

"It's called a cruiser, though I think it's called a hog, too." Maggie twirled around. "How do I look in my helmet and leathers?"

"Like a space alien," I said. "I had no idea who it was till you took off the helmet."

Cal was still grinning. "I think she looks pretty sexy."

"I don't suppose anybody wants to know what I think," Ben grumbled, "but you're both making a big mistake. Those machines are dangerous."

"Oh, don't be so stuffy, Benjamin." Maggie flicked her gloved fingers at him. "Get out and live a little. A bit of danger adds spice to life."

"Too much spice," Ben said. "When you fall off that thing and break a leg, you'll know what I'm talking about."

"Haven't you learned anything from breaking your arm?" Maggie asked. "I read an article that said if you seek different experiences throughout life, your brain will keep growing and sprout new neural pathways, no matter how old you are. It also said you can and should do this every day. Something as small as brushing your teeth with the opposite hand is enough to grow new brain cells."

"I did that for seven weeks," Ben said, "and I don't recall having any earth-shattering revelations."

Cal climbed back on the motorbike. "Well, we'll be on our way. These machines are safe enough as long as you're careful. Which I'm going to be; it takes bones longer to heal once you get over twenty-nine."

Ben didn't smile, but at least the scowl was gone. "Where are you headed now?"

"Back to Norma's. I might ride down to Ellis Bay after I drop Maggie off, just for the practice."

"I'll see you later, Maggie," I said. "I'm coming over to see Norma this afternoon. I hope one of you will tell me who the Adriana elves are."

She smiled. "If you thought about it for a few minutes, you'd figure it out yourself. Norma has many friends. We have good neighbors. You should see the casseroles in the fridge and freezer."

Cal started the motor. "You should see what a great job I did fixing the back door."

I laughed. "I'd never have thought of Cal as an elf."

"Elves don't always have pointed ears," Maggie said. "If you want to borrow my leathers, let me know. I'm sure Cal would be happy to give you a ride."

"Holly, don't you dare!" Ben was back to scowling.

I winked at Maggie as she fastened her helmet. She knew perfectly well her clothes would be too small for me, but she could never resist the chance to get Ben stirred up.



On the first of September, only six days later, Maggie phoned as I was trying to blink sleep from my eyes. "You're up early," I said. According to the herd of cats winding around my ankles, I should have been up much earlier, dishing up their breakfast.

"Norma's gone."

"Gone? You mean...?"

"She went in her sleep, Holly, which is a blessing. But I feel stunned. I know I shouldn't, but I really thought she'd last longer."

"I'm surprised, too. And disappointed. The doctor said she might have six months and it's less than five months since her diagnosis. She looked okay when I saw her last Saturday. Well, not okay, but not much worse than she's looked the last couple of months."

"It just doesn't seem fair." Maggie sounded close to tears.

"Ben and I will be over as soon as we get some clothes on and grab a bit of breakfast. Have you eaten?"

"I can't. But I'll make a pot of coffee. You'll want some and maybe it will get my adrenalin going."

An hour later I pulled into Norma's driveway and parked beside Dr. Giles's car. Cal's motorcycle was parked behind Norma's car. Ben hadn't said much on the way over. Like many men, it was difficult for him to express strong feelings.

We walked into the living room just as Dr. Giles came out of Norma's bedroom. He looked at our faces and said, "She went easy, just the way she wanted."

"That's good," I said. "It just seems so quick. We all thought she'd have another couple of months."

"When I saw her last week," Dr. Giles said, "I was sure she had only a few days left. She wouldn't let me say anything because she thought it would be easier on her friends if it happened suddenly."

"She didn't want any of us hovering over her." Maggie came out of the kitchen with Cal at her heels. She was clutching a cup of coffee and her eyes were red.

Ben wisely chose action over words. He put his arms around Maggie and held her close for a minute, then let her go, almost, it seemed, handing her back to Cal.

Dr. Giles had found the phone book. "I'll call the funeral home." He glanced at Maggie. "Mrs. Sutton, do you know if Norma had any wishes about a service or burial?"

"She told me she wanted to be cremated and have her ashes buried under the big white lilac tree at the corner of the house." Maggie took a sip of her coffee. "I know where her papers are. I'll look at the will and see if she put it in writing. Maybe there will be something there about a service; she never mentioned anything about that."

"There has to be a celebration of life," Cal said firmly. "She lived on this island her whole life and she knew everybody. We went to school together, though she was ahead of me maybe four or five years."

Dr. Giles put the phone down. "All right, that's taken care of. You can speak to the undertaker when he comes, Mrs. Sutton." He headed toward the front door but stopped beside Ben. "How's the arm?"

"It's coming along, but awfully slow."

Dr. Giles gave him a gentle smile. "I'm sure you'd feel the same if it had taken only a week to heal. Your middle name should be 'Impatience', Ben Sutton." He didn't wait for Ben to reply but hurried out to his car.

"Is it all right if I say goodbye?" I asked Maggie.

"Of course."

Ben and I walked softly into Norma's bedroom. She was lying with her head on her pillow, her face serene, as if she were merely sleeping. BJ was stretched out beside her, and I realized this was the first time he hadn't bounced down the front steps to greet me when I arrived. Even when I spoke to him, he didn't stir, but lay still with his chin on his paws, looking at me out of the saddest brown eyes I'd ever seen.

I touched Norma's hand, then turned away. She was no longer there. Perhaps I would feel her spirit in the garden. We went out, closing the door behind us, and headed to the kitchen for some coffee.

In the living room, Maggie said, "Trevor should be taking care of all this, not me. He's her son, after all. I feel as though I'm interfering."

"But he's not here," I said. "And it seems to me more likely that you'll follow her wishes. I think Trevor would do what was most convenient for him."

Maggie glanced at her watch. "It's after nine. Someone should be in his office by now. I tried his house earlier and no one answered." She opened an address book that I recognized as Norma's and punched in a number.

While she was making the call, Ben and I went into the vegetable garden. The tops of the root vegetables looked generally green and healthy though I could see the odd yellow leaf here and there, indicating that the mellow days of autumn had begun. Almost everything else had been harvested. When I'd visited Norma the previous week, she said she and Maggie had frozen all the peas, beans, and corn. I looked at the shaded garden bench where we'd often sat and, though it might have been only my imagination, I did seem to feel her presence, as gently warm as the morning sunlight.

"Let's go back in," Ben said. "Maybe Maggie's got hold of Trevor by now."

Maggie looked up from the phone. "I guess I'm holding the bag. Trevor's receptionist says he and his wife left last night for two weeks' holiday in Europe. They won't be back until the sixteenth."

"Does she know his itinerary?" Ben asked.

Maggie nodded. "She'll telephone his hotel in Paris and give him the news. And she

promised to call me back as soon as she could."

"You've done all you can," I said. "Do you want me to help you find the will?"

"No, I know where it is; I just need to read it. Go to the sunroom and talk to the cats, Holly. They're pretty subdued."

"Have they said their goodbyes?"

"I think so. They were all on the bed with her when I went to wake her up this morning. They experienced death last January when the other three cats died, so I'm fairly sure they know that's what happened to Norma."

Ben and I found Doran, Smoke and Blue Eyes lying in a patch of sunshine. They acknowledged us by looking up but didn't offer their usual greetings. I wanted to pick up Doran, my Bad Boy, and cuddle him but I knew that it would have to be his idea, so I scooped up Blue Eyes and sat with her in my lap. She was restless for a moment, then settled down so I could stroke her short, thick orange fur. Ben was holding Smoke, who seemed willing to discuss life with any human who came along.

"I know I'm not the one you want, Blue Eyes," I said, "but I'm afraid this is all you're going to get for now. Maggie's busy today."

Doran watched for a few minutes, then got up and paced between us. Finally, he sat at my feet and glared at Blue Eyes.

"Come on up, Doran," I said, "and don't be a selfish little pig. You can have one knee, but Blue Eyes gets to keep the other one." I slid her over to perch on one knee and patted the other as an invitation. To my surprise, he jumped up and consented to let himself be restricted to half my lap. What surprised me even more was, that after I'd stroked both cats for a minute or two, Blue Eyes leaned over and licked Doran's face and he didn't smack her.

After about ten minutes the three cats jumped down, stretched, and headed toward the kitchen and the cat flap in the back door. "I think that helped a bit," I said to Ben. "Now they're going out to inspect their territory and pretend to be fierce, feral jaguars in the rainforest."

Ben nodded. "If they're anything like ours, they'll soon come in and nap for about three hours."

"Cats know sleep is a good thing. They'll miss Norma for a while, but for now at least, they have their familiar territory and Maggie."

We returned to the kitchen, topped up our coffee, and joined Maggie and Cal in the living room. Maggie said, "I read the will and all the instructions are there, so I don't suppose I can go wrong if I do what it says, even if Trevor does object."

"Maybe he'll come back from his holiday and take over," Ben said.

"In one way, I wish he would," Maggie said. "I'd like to be relieved of the responsibility. But in another way, I hope he doesn't. He didn't have any respect for his mother in life and I doubt if he will in death." She sighed. "We'll just have to wait for the phone call. But I did phone Norma's two grandsons, John and Bruce. They both said I should follow their grandmother's wishes, whatever they were."

"Did they mention their father?" I asked.

Maggie shook her head. "I told them I was waiting to hear from him but neither had any comment to make."

"They've both been away at college and had various jobs," I said. "I suspect they've been out of the nest long enough to develop at least some objectivity about Trevor. Maybe they had him figured out before they left home. I don't know."

"I don't suppose we'll ever know," Maggie said. "I've met them a few times and thought they

were nice boys. Certainly, Norma was very fond of them. Oh yes, and they both said they'd come to any memorial service held for her."

Cal put down his mug. "Like I said before, a celebration of life is the way to go. It's what we used to call a wake. We need to pick a day and announce it in her obit in the paper. And it should be in this house, where she lived all her life."

"It'll be expensive if half the island comes," Ben said.

"Nah, not the way we do it here," Cal said. "It's a potluck kind of deal. Everybody will bring something to eat and whatever they want to drink. All we have to do is borrow the big urns from the high school so we can give them tea and coffee if they want it. Oh yeah, and plates and napkins and stuff."

"That's good," Ben said, "but there will be some expenses and I don't think Maggie should have to pay them."

"Benjamin, stop being a cost accountant and just relax," Maggie said. "I paid Norma for board and room, but she wouldn't let me pay as much as I thought it was worth, so whatever it costs me to carry out her wishes is money well spent."

"Trevor should reimburse you," Ben said.

"He might," Maggie said. Then she smiled, for the first time that morning. "If he doesn't, of course, I could always sue him. That would be fun. Think of all the new neural pathways it would build."

We spent the rest of the morning making tentative decisions, pending a call from Trevor. Maggie picked Sunday the tenth as a good day for a celebration of life and she and I counted plates, cups and flatware and made a list of who might lend us more.

"I'll have work for Cal and Ben, too, if his arm is all right, closer to the tenth," Maggie said. "They'll need to dig up all the potatoes, carrots, beets and so on. Norma's instructions say that whoever comes to the wake is to take home either a bag of fresh root vegetables or a container of frozen green vegetables."

"What a wonderful memento," I said.

"Perhaps that's why her garden was so successful," Maggie said. "She said it produced more this year than it ever has. It made her happy to think that she could feed all her friends from her garden."

The hearse came and Cal had to hold BJ in his arms so the undertaker could move Norma's body and take it away. The dog whined and struggled to get down, wanting to go with Norma. I watched the hearse drive away, my eyes damp. But I realized that the tears were more for BJ and me than for Norma. I'd lost a good friend and so had he.

Maggie touched my shoulder. "She really was ready to go, Holly. She told me last week that because Trevor's suit had been dismissed and the community plan was well under way, her land was safe, and she was finally free. With no more responsibilities, she could drift away whenever she wanted."

"Then I won't grieve," I said. "We'll just get on with paying her our respects. And we'd better get on with finishing your cottage. I don't know what the Islands Trust has in mind for this property."

"Oh, there's no hurry," Maggie said. "When that nice Mr. Geraghty was here, he told me I'd probably have six months to tidy up the house and plan a move before the Heritage Society would be ready to take over."

When Cal put BJ down, he trotted back into Norma's bedroom and cried to be lifted up onto the bed. Ben did so and the dog lay down where Norma had been. The look in his eyes was

heartbreaking. "This dog is going to grieve for a long time." Ben petted him but the dog refused to respond. "It's tough when animals get left behind. You can't explain to them what did happen or what's going to happen."

"He's a cheerful little fellow," Maggie said, "and he's only six. He'll bounce back. Holly, help me heat some soup and slice some bread. I'm actually feeling hungry."

At one-thirty, as we were washing the dishes, the phone rang and Maggie went to answer it.

"That was Trevor's receptionist." Maggie looked furious. "She says he isn't going to break up his holiday. She kept telling me how hard he works and how much he needs this break, but I suspect it was to keep me from thinking what I'm thinking anyway."

"If you won't say it, Maggie, I will." Cal's face was grim. "The selfish little bastard treated his mother like dirt when she was alive and he's doing the same now she's dead."

"So he'll be back on the fifteenth," I said. "Did he say anything about a service?"

"Apparently not," Maggie said. "I say we go ahead with what we planned. If Trevor wants to have a memorial or family service when he gets back, there's nothing to stop him. I don't think he'd have been interested in doing a celebration of life here at the farm."

"From what I've seen of him," Cal said, "he don't give a damn for Adriana, except where it can make him some money. So yeah, I'm with you, Maggie."

"We're all with you, Maggie," I said. "So, let's get to work."



The public hearing on September ninth was rather an anticlimax. Fewer people came than to the information meeting, and no one had serious objections to the community plan we'd drawn up. Nor was Trevor there to wax eloquent about subdividing and selling every square foot of Adriana. At the end of the evening, as I'd hoped, Duff and Joanna and I all voted in favor of the plan.

When we were having a drink afterward, at the Yellow Duck, Duff said, "Well, one more step in the process is done. The next thing we have to do is draft a zoning bylaw implementing the community plan."

"I've already done a draft," I said. "I've been researching what other islands have done and taking what I thought was the best wording from each, then incorporating the zoning and regulations we developed for the community plan."

"You are little Miss Efficiency." Joanna smiled.

"Little Miss Worrywort is more like it," Ben said. "She won't rest until the bylaw has been voted in and the island is safe from developers."

"I'd call it determination rather than worry." Duff turned to me. "I know you write *Tidelines* for the *Advocate* and I think you told me you write fiction sometimes, too. Do you ever write poetry? Did you know that you'll never find words in the English language to rhyme with month, orange, silver, or purple?"

"I don't think I ever wanted to," I said.

Duff kept looking at me and I knew he was waiting for some weird or interesting fact about cats, but I was thinking about the celebration of life for Norma the next day and didn't feel like playing the game.

But Joanna, perhaps reading my mind, played it for me. "Did you know that more than a million dogs in North America have been named as the primary beneficiaries in their owners' wills?"

"Oh," said Ben, "that would explain why Norma left everything to Trevor."



The weather was warm and sunny for the celebration at Norma's. Ben and I went over to the farm early, leaving Nicky locked up and sulking. Cal was already there, his motorbike leaning up against the house, out of the way. John and Bruce, Norma's grandsons, had also come early.

I'd been curious about these two young men, wondering if they looked or sounded like Trevor and, of course, hoping they wouldn't. As people were always telling me, I worry too much. Both boys were tall and dark, nothing like either Norma or Trevor. They shook hands with both Ben and me, gave us warm smiles and thanked us for helping their grandmother. I nearly asked what they thought about their father not being there but bit my tongue in time.

The six of us prepared the tables and made coffee and tea. When that was done, Bruce asked if there was anything else they could do. Maggie shook her head. "Cal dug up all the root vegetables yesterday and Ben gathered them into piles ready for guests to take home."

Cal, who knew all the old-timers on the island and even most of the younger people, had helped Maggie arrange a display of photographs of Norma, her family, and the farm, ranging from old sepia prints from the early 1900's, black and white prints with deckled edges from the forties, and the latest prints from Maggie's digital camera. I stood for a long time with John and Bruce and looked at the pictures, while they told me stories about different people and scenes.

"You seem to know a lot about your grandmother's life."

John smiled down at me. "We used to spend hours with her on the couch while she told us all those stories. It was great."

I felt as though this gathering truly was a celebration. Somehow, seeing Norma's whole life in photographs made it feel complete, made me feel the rightness of her circle of time spinning to a stop after seventy-eight years.

People started arriving at one o'clock and kept coming for the next two hours. Around two-thirty Cal said he'd counted a hundred and two and then lost track. We had decided to keep things informal, and several people told anecdotes about some aspect of Norma's life. Both her grandsons made very short speeches about what a wonderful granny she'd been, and many people had tears in their eyes. The house and garden were crowded but it was a relaxed group, united in an obviously comfortable sort of way.

I realized that only now had I learned what a long-term community like Adriana could be. Not merely a gossip network, as I'd assumed for the past five years, but a quiet, powerful force that looked after its own. When I thought of all the work that had been done around the place, of the food and flowers brought to the door, it seemed to me that the community, like Shaz, often operated under cover.

Just the same, when yet another person began a speech with, "We are here to honor the memory of Norma Brentwood," I felt I couldn't bear any more. I'd never been completely at ease in large crowds, anyway, and it didn't look as if that would ever change. I slipped out the back and walked down to a tiny cove out of sight of the house, perhaps three hundred yards away. I sat on a drift log and let my thoughts go free to imagine what Norma might have felt when she'd sat here as a child, as a young woman, as a widow and, finally, when she'd said goodbye.

There had been a bank of white fog over the Strait early in the morning, when Ben and I were doing our chores, and foghorns had been calling in the distance: bass, tenor, contralto, and alto. Now the sky was clear blue and the sun was warm, though the air had the cool tang of

autumn. Someone was burning leaves and the tantalizing smell of smoke made me think of having a cigarette. I decided it was lucky I had too much pride to ask any of the smokers at the house for one. I put cigarettes out of my mind and concentrated on listening to wavelets brushing softly over the shingle and birds talking to each other in the trees behind me.

The birds were busy, as though afraid they wouldn't get enough seeds, worms and bugs before the winter brought rain and the occasional snowfall. I named them as I watched: flickers, finches, sparrows, kingfishers, starlings, robins, towhees. I caught a new movement from the corner of my eye. A small weasel came out on the rocks a few yards away, shaking the water off his glossy fur. He looked at me with his little pointed face and bright eyes, decided I was worth ignoring and went about his business.

I sat there for a while longer, basking in the precious heat. Every few seconds another oak or maple leaf swirled down, drifting erratically, and rustled as it settled with its mates. A squirrel began scolding behind me and I glanced around to see Doran stalking a sparrow. It must have been young and stupid for it didn't fly until I clapped my hands and said, "Doran!" He gave me a dirty look.

"I'm sorry, your highness, I know your territory has been invaded by hordes of people, but you don't need to take out your frustration on inexperienced little birds." He huffed, allowed me to pet him for all of four seconds, then headed into the underbrush. He and Blue Eyes had disappeared outside as soon as people began to arrive. Smoke and BJ stayed to chat with everyone but after a while even they became overwhelmed and left.

My mood broken, I rose, brushed off my skirt and went back to the house. It was a relief to see that people were taking their bags of vegetables and leaving. When the last one had gone, Norma's grandsons thanked us and went off to catch the ferry.

"That was a lot of hard work," Maggie said, "but I'm glad we did it."

Cal nodded. "Me, too. Why don't we feed the animals and then take ourselves to Mora Bay for dinner?"

"Good idea," Maggie said, "but let's use Norma's car. I'm too tired to be adventurous and ride on your bike. Benjamin, will you and Holly join us?"

"We'll meet you," Ben said. "We have to go home and pay some attention to our own crowd. Nicky will be frantic to get out by now."

"The Apple Tree," Maggie said. "Tonight, I want the best."

When Ben unlocked the back door, Nicky shot out, nearly knocking me off the bottom step. But he wasn't moving so fast that I didn't notice small white feathers sticking to his fur. We walked into the house to find more feathers floating in the laundry room and the kitchen. The living room furniture was covered in them and the three teenage Siamese lolling on the couch were decorated as well. George sat on top of the piano, ears back, looking grumpy. Ming and Shaz were trying, without success, to bat feathers at each other and Kaylie perched on the back of Ben's chair, sneezing.

It was obvious that Nicky had pulled one of my ancient pillows off the couch and ripped it to shreds. "Damn that dog! He's created a whole universe of feathers."

"Oh, not a universe, just a small country." Ben seemed philosophical. "He hasn't chewed anything since he killed Maggie's slippers when she first moved in here. I guess he temporarily reverted to a primitive Samoyed."

"Is your arm well enough to handle a vacuum cleaner?" I demanded. "Because if it isn't, Nicky will have to pick up every feather in this house with his primitive little tongue."

"I think Nicky did a good thing. It's a relief to see you angry and laying down the law

instead of sad and grieving."

That comment surprised me into silence, and I reminded myself that I was supposed to be celebrating Norma's life, not mourning her death.

Anyway, it was Nicky's turn to mourn. When we left for dinner half an hour later, locking him in the laundry room, he flopped down and covered his face between his paws.



XIII -- Going to the Dump

Derek went home to his parents in Sooke, looking forward to a couple of weeks off before going back to the University of Victoria at the end of September. The crew working on Maggie's cottage was now down to one and a half, the half being Ben since he still couldn't do any heavy work with his right arm. The cottage was well beyond lock-up stage, however. The floors had all been laid and, by Friday the fifteenth, Cal had finished installing the kitchen cabinets. "Lookin' good," he'd said, as he stopped by the house on his way home late that afternoon. "Figure I'm almost done, except maybe for landscaping around the patio."

"There's some finishing work to do," Ben said, "but if I take it easy, I can get that done over the next month or so. We need to get my mother organized to pick out a stove and fridge and decide what color she wants the walls painted."

"I'll talk to her tonight," Cal said. "We're going to a movie."

Saturday the sixteenth dawned bright and sunny and, after breakfast, I said to Ben, "I'm going over to Maggie's to see if she needs more help with the garden produce. When I was there on Wednesday, she told me the apples on that old tree by the greenhouse should be about ready to pick."

"You'd better phone before you go," he said. "She and Cal might have decided to go shopping for kitchen appliances."

I tried Norma's number and after a couple of rings, a voice said, "The number you have reached is no longer in service."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," I said to Caesar, who was batting at the phone cord and getting himself tangled up in it. "I must have punched in the wrong number." I tried again but got the same response. By the third time, I was worried. "I'm going right away," I said to Ben. "Something's wrong. Are you coming?"

Ben shook his head. "Maybe my mother has gone entirely modern and bought herself a cell phone."

It seemed to take forever to reach Gordon Bay. I kept telling myself that I was worrying too much but couldn't make myself believe it. I reminded myself to look at the maples and appreciate the leaves changing from green to yellow and red, but that didn't work either. When I got there, it was obvious something was wrong. Norma's car was gone and in its place was a moving truck, backed up to the front steps. Two young men wearing baseball caps were loading an old-fashioned metal bed frame into the truck.

"Where's Mrs. Sutton?" I demanded.

"The lady that was living here?" the tall, dark man said. "Don't think she's in the house. You could maybe look out back in the garden."

Lady that *was* living here?

I hurried around the back. My mother-in-law was sitting on the garden seat. BJ wore his leash, which was tied to the frame of the seat. Maggie's eyes were red, and she was smoking a joint, which as far as I knew, she'd never done except with Norma. "Maggie, what's wrong?"

"That little bastard is cleaning the house out. He made me so mad I started crying and that made me even madder. I told him what I thought of him, and he just laughed. If I was a man, I'd have beaten him up."

"Do you mean Trevor? What happened?"

Maggie took a deep breath. "He drove in here about eight o'clock this morning with a young

blonde woman in his car. At first, I thought it was his wife, but she was too young to have kids as old as John and Bruce. He walked into the house as if he owned the place, with her hanging off his arm, both of them acting like I was a piece of furniture. He took the car keys off the rack where we always kept them and told the woman to take Norma's car. I asked him what he was doing, and he waved Norma's will in my face and told me he was collecting his possessions."

"I thought you had her will." I was angry now.

"That was just a copy," Maggie said. "I suppose he got another copy from her lawyer. Maybe they came yesterday to get it and stayed in a motel, I don't know."

"And then?"

"He shoved all Norma's papers, all her letters and snapshots, into a box and put that in his car. I kept following him around and asking what he was doing, and he told me to mind my own business. Then the moving truck came. Trevor told the two men to take everything, including Norma's clothes and books and the pictures on the walls." Maggie shook her head. "Everything."

"What was he thinking? What does he expect you to do?" How could a sane man be so mean to an elderly lady?

"I asked him that," Maggie said, "and he told me he didn't care what I did. By that time, I was over my shock and getting really angry, so I told him he owed me what I'd spent on Norma's celebration and the funeral home. And do you know what he said?"

"I can imagine."

"He accused me of living off Norma and said I was very, very lucky he'd decided not to have the estate sue me for board and room and the use of the car for the past year and a half. So naturally he wasn't going to reimburse me for anything."

"Oh, Maggie, this is awful! I wish I'd come earlier. I'd have told him a few things. But you said a long time ago that he acts like a spoiled little boy."

"Oh, he's far worse than just a spoiled brat," Maggie said. "By that time, those men had started carrying furniture out. I told Trevor I assumed he'd leave me the bed I was sleeping in at least and he said, 'You can put your personal possessions in the closet in the bedroom you've been using. Everything else in this house belonged to my mother. I'm taking all of it and that includes the bed in your room.'"

"I'm surprised you didn't throw something at him."

"I threw a lot of words at him, which did me no good at all," she said. "He watched me while I took my things from the dresser and night table and from the bathroom and put them in the closet. Then he followed me downstairs while I took my coats from the hall closet and my books from the living room."

"I don't think he can do this," I said. "I don't think it's legal. Doesn't the will have to be probated first? He just got back from Europe, so he hasn't had time to take care of the legalities."

"Maybe it's not legal," Maggie said, "but he's done it. I know he's entitled to everything Norma left, so I don't see what I could have done to stop him."

"What about phoning the RCMP?"

"What with? He must have had the phone disconnected last night or this morning. I didn't need to use it last night because Cal and I went out for dinner and a movie. I only found out the line was dead when I tried to call you this morning."

"We have to do something about that man. I don't know what, but surely between us we can figure out a suitable revenge." An awful thought occurred to me. "Maggie, where are the cats?"

"Outside somewhere." She rubbed a hand across her face. "They were really freaked out when Trevor was stomping around, and especially when the furniture started disappearing."

"I'm going to go ask those men what specific instructions Trevor gave them." When I went around to the front, they were carrying the refrigerator down the veranda steps. "Are you taking that, too?"

The taller of the two men said, "Mr. Brentwood told us to take everything, including the stove and fridge."

"If you'd said something, Mrs. Sutton and I would have taken the food out of it. I suppose you've just left it on the counter?"

"The food's still in the fridge, ma'am," said the tall man. "That's what he said to do. Same thing with the freezer in the cellar."

"But that's crazy!"

"We're just following orders," he said.

"What did Mr. Brentwood say about the cats and the dog?"

"To leave 'em here."

I went out to the kitchen and looked in the cupboards. They were empty. I went back to the veranda. "But you've taken all the cat and dog food."

"Mr. Brentwood said somebody would be fool enough to feed them," the short man said. He wiped sweat off his forehead with a blue handkerchief. "I don't believe in being mean to animals, so I left the dishes of food that were on the floor. I figured you and the other lady would make sure the animals get fed."

"You're right about that," I said. "But I don't understand why you're leaving the food in the fridge and freezer. It will thaw out and perhaps start to spoil by the time you get it home."

The tall man shrugged. "Guess it won't matter if I tell you. This whole truckload is going straight to the Hartland dump."

"Straight to the dump!" I repeated, stunned. The Hartland dump was on the big island, not far from Victoria. Once Norma's possessions had gone through that gate, they were gone forever. I went back to the garden and told Maggie what he'd said. We stared at each other for a moment.

"Trevor Brentwood is sick," Maggie said. "He has to be. Most of what Norma left wouldn't fetch any money, but some of those things were antiques. And all that good food!"

"He's getting even with Norma for not letting him have the land."

Maggie nodded. "It's amazing what deprivations some people will endure in order to make a point."

"Well, he may have cut off his nose to spite Norma, but she's not here anymore; she doesn't care. You and the animals are the ones being spited."

As though he knew we were talking about him, Doran trotted across the garden, skirting piles of dying potato tops, and rubbed against my ankles. "That's my good Bad Boy," I said. "You're going to be all right."

He jumped up and nosed at Maggie's pocket. "Sorry," she said, "I don't have any with me today. How about killing a little grass?" She broke off a tall stalk of hay near the fence and pulled it through the grass. Doran pounced half a dozen times before she stopped, then sat down to chew on the ripe seed head.

Maggie dropped the stalk of hay. "He loves killing grass even more than string. I'm sure the other cats are hiding because of the disruption in the house. They'll come back when the truck has gone. Let's go inside and see how much the movers have done."

While Maggie went into the downstairs bathroom, I climbed the stairs. The three empty rooms upstairs echoed my footfalls. Bright patterns of wallpaper showed where pictures had hung and, where the beds had stood, a few dust bunnies retreated from the currents of air I

created as I walked past them. I opened Maggie's closet to make sure the movers hadn't taken her things by mistake, but the space was crammed full.

Maggie came out of the bathroom looking furious again. "He got the power cut off, too," she said. "When I flushed the toilet, the water pump for the well should have started and it didn't." She flipped the switch for the kitchen lights. "See? No power."

The two men were moving the few chairs left in the sunroom. "We're just about done, lady," the tall one said. "You want to move that dog someplace else?"

Maggie said, "Surely you're not taking the garden seat!"

"Ma'am, Mr. Brentwood said to take everything. We got to empty the garden shed and the greenhouse, too."

Maggie checked the back porch when we went outside. "They've taken the cat carriers." She looked across at the greenhouse. "I still have a couple of pot plants in the greenhouse. Do you think they'll take those?"

"Of course, they will. They'll recognize the plants for what they are. And I don't think Trevor will be checking what goes to the dump so a few things will fall off the truck before it gets there."

Maggie looked puzzled. "Fall off?" Her face cleared. "Yes, of course. What an appropriate description."

"Apparently it happens now and then." I took my car keys out of my pocket. "I'm going home to get Ben and Cal. We need to move you and the animals to Holly Haven."

An hour later the three of us arrived at the farm to find the moving truck gone and Maggie sitting on the veranda steps with BJ at her feet. The dog wagged his tail just once, but he didn't get up to greet us and still looked as if he might start crying.

Ben and Cal went into the empty house, and I could hear them cursing, even when they tramped upstairs. They came out shaking their heads and looking grim. "What a stupid, wasteful, senseless bastard that man is," Ben said.

"Not just stupid, downright wicked!" Cal looked furious.

"Do you think there's anything we can do?" Maggie asked.

"Not about all the stuff Trevor is sending to the Hartland dump," I said. "But there are several people who need to know what he's done. Robert Geraghty, first of all, since he's the Trust's lawyer. He can advise the Trust about the power and phone and about the house being abandoned."

Ben looked at me thoughtfully. "We should also phone the president of the Heritage Society and explain what's happened. Mrs. Good will be upset. With all the furniture being gone, it means the Society will have to start looking for period pieces to create the right atmosphere for an early 1900's farmhouse."

"Perhaps they won't bother." Maggie sounded exhausted. "Perhaps they'll abandon the project."

"Don't think so," Cal said. "I've known Betty Good a long time. What she starts, she finishes. And it don't pay to get in her way when she's after something."

"I'm going to tell Dr. Giles about it when I have my next appointment," Ben said. "People need to know about this!"

"Don't worry. They will." Cal nodded, as if to himself. "Trevor was a little snot-nose when he was a kid. Guess he never grew out of it."

Maggie handed me B.J.'s leash. "Benjamin, can we get those cats into the carriers you brought?" she said. "They did come into the house when the truck left, and I shut them in the

sunroom. They're already upset and confused, so I'd like to get the rest of trauma over with as soon as we can."

Cal went upstairs to load Maggie's things into cardboard boxes while Ben and Maggie went into the sunroom. Smoke and Blue Eyes had mellow personalities, so I knew the yowl of outrage had to be Doran objecting to the cage. When the sunroom door opened, Maggie said, "I'd have given them Gravol if I had any, but it's gone to the dump. It would be too late now, in any case. By the time it took effect, we'd be at your place."

Maggie rode with Cal in his truck, but the three cats came with Ben and me, the carriers lined up on the back seat. Doran complained and swore most of the way home, drowning out Smoke's quiet little protests. Blue Eyes said nothing but she was panting, so I knew she was upset.

By dinnertime, Maggie had put some of her belongings in one of our upstairs guest rooms and the rest in the cottage. We'd installed the cats there, too, with food, water, and new litter boxes that I'd luckily bought on sale the week before.

"But there's nothing in here," Maggie said. "They'll be lonely."

"They have each other," I said. "And they need to get used to their new house, so they'll probably spend hours going from room to room and sniffing everything. The only unfamiliar human scent will be Derek's."

"Wait here," Maggie said, "I have to go over to the house." She came back five minutes later carrying a quilt. "I'll put this on the floor in my bedroom for them to sleep on." She looked a bit sheepish. "I stole it after Trevor left and before those men took Norma's bed away. It has Norma's scent and they'll be able to smell my clothes in the closet, too."

"Of course. And we'll leave the cat flap open so they can go into the run." We tried to cuddle the cats for a few minutes, but they were tense and struggled to get down. Then they paced around their strange new surroundings, sniffing and looking out the patio doors.

Maggie stood for a moment at the door before we left. "I hate leaving them alone. And I'm worried about BJ being a nuisance in your house."

"Nicky isn't territorial," I said. "He and BJ always got along fine when Norma came here. And my cats won't take any nonsense from a dog."

Doran, on his way by to check out the laundry room and the food dishes, looked up at me and huffed.



By Wednesday, when I had to leave for the trustees' meeting at The Yellow Duck, Maggie had moved into the cottage. She had a stove and a fridge, her queen-size bed, dresser, and one easy chair for the living room. Nicky had apparently adopted BJ; the two of them went almost everywhere together, though the little sausage dog was very subdued. The cats were restless, still looking for Norma and the old familiar furniture and smells, but at least they were eating and sleeping.

"Time will take care of the restlessness," I said, as Maggie and I got into the car. "I know it's tough for them to be confined to a run after complete freedom, but we can't risk them trying to return to the farm."

"I know, but it's almost as if they're my kids; I want to give them everything."

"You are giving them everything. Food, warmth, shelter, love, and a place to exercise." While helping Maggie install her furniture, I'd watched all three of them going up and down the

cat trees. "You're also giving them security. Without that, they might lose all the other things."

"How long will your meeting last, Holly?" Maggie asked, as we slowed for the downhill slope into Mora Bay.

"A couple of hours at most." I was dropping Maggie on the main street to shop for dishes, cutlery, pots, and pans. "Come down to The Yellow Duck at twelve and have lunch with us. We can pick up your boxes on the way home."

The meeting took only an hour and a half. I'd emailed my draft of the zoning bylaw to Duff and Joanna, and they'd sent back suggestions. This process continued until the last session produced only one amendment. I hoped the copy I'd printed this morning would be the final draft and so it was.

"We're ready to go, Holly," Duff said. "You agree, Joanna?"

She nodded. "Don't see how it can be improved. It's clear and precise. No loopholes either, far as I can see, though people are like mice. They'll find some little hole. Or think they have."

"All right," Duff said. "Let's pick a date for the public hearing."

We finally settled on October fourteenth, a Saturday three and half weeks away, which would give people plenty of time to read the notice in the *Adriana Advocate* and set aside time to come and speak or listen to everybody else. I wondered if Trevor would show his face. He probably didn't think he'd done anything wrong, and he certainly didn't lack nerve, but I doubted he could find any reason to spend his precious time promoting development of an island which he had symbolically thrown in the dump.

When we'd finished the business part of the meeting, I told Joanna and Duff what Trevor had done the previous Saturday. It was the first time I'd seen Duff so shocked that he was rendered speechless.

"That's just...that's just dreadful!" Joanna spluttered. "Is your mother-in-law all right? And the animals?"

"They're all fine," I said. "Maggie's shopping for dishes right now, but she'll be here at noon to have lunch with us. She and the animals are already living in the cottage and I'm so grateful that it's almost finished. It'll be a nuisance having to move furniture around when we paint, but nobody minds."

Duff said, "Have you told Robert Geraghty about this?"

"Maggie phoned him," I said. "He didn't say much other than to sympathize, but I don't suppose there was much he could say. He asked if Maggie had locked up the house and she had."

"The keys should go to Betty Good," he said. "If Maggie has the keys with her, I'll take them to Betty. She needs to know about this."

"I think Cal's already talked to her," I said.

After I shut down the laptop, we moved out to the main room of the Yellow Duck and ordered a beer. Five minutes before twelve, Maggie came in. I couldn't help admiring her. In spite of her grief and troubles, in spite of her exhaustion, she still managed to dress as if going to high tea in a castle. Her makeup was understated and effective, her red hair curled around her face, and even her shoes looked as if they'd just been polished.

Duff offered to buy her a drink and she said, "Thank you. I'd like a gin and tonic if I may. Light on the gin, though. I have so much to do I can't afford to fall asleep this afternoon."

"You deserve a nap," I said. "And the cats would probably join you."

Duff said, "Did you know the average person falls asleep in seven minutes?"

Maggie smiled. "I must be well above average then. These days it takes me about seven seconds."

I knew Duff would be waiting for my response. "Did you know that cats snore, just like human beings?"

"So do dogs," Joanna said. She signaled the waiter. "I'm famished. And in a hurry. I have a lot of tidying up to do in my garden."

After we'd ordered lunch, Duff repeated his offer to take the keys to Norma's house over to Mrs. Good.

"That's very kind of you," Maggie said. "But I want to make one last trip to the house and see that everything is all right. I believe there are some apples ready to pick as well, if Trevor's moving company didn't take the tree to the dump along with everything else. I'll give you the keys afterward."

After lunch and the usual island gossip, Maggie and I picked up her shopping and went back to the cottage. I helped her unpack and wash dishes and pans while Doran, Blue Eyes and Smoke prowled the cat run and BJ ran around outside with Nicky. A loud, imperious yowl sounded from the patio. I looked up to see Georgius Felinus Rex standing at the door and trying to claw it open.

"Oh, dear, I hadn't thought about my gang wanting access to your house," I said. "But since George believes he owns us as well as Holly Haven, I should have realized this would happen."

"He probably spent a lot of time here when the place was being built, too," Maggie said. "No doubt he wants to see if we've done the finishing properly."

I slipped out the back door and went around to the front of the house. George pranced along the patio to meet me. I picked him up and cuddled him. "George, I hate to tell you this, but this cottage belongs to three of your cousins. It's their territory now, so it can't be part of yours."

I didn't know whether George had met Maggie's three cats through the wire mesh of the cat run. We'd all been too busy since Saturday to worry about the niceties of feline etiquette. But it was time the matter of boundaries was settled. Or as settled as it could be, since George's desire to rule the entire world was in direct conflict with Doran's conviction that he himself was supreme ruler. I carried George around to the west side of the cottage and put him down.

He sniffed, the hair on the back of his neck rising as he spotted the three cats inside the run and marched up to the wire. Doran leapt off the cat tree in the southwest corner of the run and strutted up to George. The two of them spat and hissed and lashed out with their front paws. Luckily, their blows rebounded off the wire and after a few seconds they stopped and simply glared at one another.

George then began to sniff his way around the perimeter of the run, apparently looking for some way to get inside and beat the pants off the big gray and white intruder. Doran did the same, no doubt looking for a way out. Blue Eyes and Smoke sprawled on the other cat tree, looking almost bored.

I went back inside to report to Maggie. "Yours can't get out and mine can't get in, so they'll just have to work it out themselves," I said. "Perhaps protecting the cat run will make Doran feel more like it's his territory now."

"I'm so glad they have that run," Maggie said. "It gives them some space for themselves. They still want me to let them out through the patio sliding doors and I feel so sad that I can't."

I hugged her. "I'd be the same. But we both know it wouldn't work."

She came back to the house with me when we were through arranging her kitchen and helped me peel potatoes for supper. Ben came in from the greenhouse at five and poured us all a drink. As we wandered into the living room, I saw half a dozen deer halfway down the meadow, eating the carrots Ben had put out for them.

"They were there this morning, too," Ben said. "They think BJ is quite weird."

"Why?" I asked. "Was Nicky trying to teach him to herd the deer?"

"He wouldn't have much luck," Ben said. "The deer are so used to Nicky they just walk around him. BJ barked at them and one of the does put her head down and sniffed the dog all over. He backed away and she followed him. Finally, she butted him with her head, knocking him off his feet. He got up and scuttled off to hide behind Nicky. The doe snorted and rejoined the herd."

"Well, he is a lot smaller than Nicky," I said.

"And he's a different color," Maggie said. "But all dogs must smell much the same to deer, so I'm sure they know what he is."

"But does BJ know what he is?" Ben asked. "It's all too obvious that Nicky thinks he's human."

"And cats don't care what anybody thinks," I said, as I watched Shaz flow off the bottom shelf of the cat bunk bed and stroll over to Maggie. She climbed onto Maggie's lap and, fortunately, butted the hand that did not hold a gin and tonic. "Purebred or not, all cats have healthy, well-developed inner princesses."



XIV -- Drama King

During the next couple of days, Maggie and I made two more trips to Mora Bay for furniture, housekeeping necessities, cat food and litter. "I absolutely have to have another easy chair," she said. "I can't invite Cal over for the evening because one of us would have to sit on the floor. If I invite you and Ben, two of us would have to sit on the floor."

"You could always sit in Cal's lap."

She smiled. "Impossible. Whoever gets the chair will also get anywhere from one to three cats looking for a warm, comfortable place to sleep."

On Saturday, Maggie and I went to Gordon Bay so that she could, as she put it, say a proper goodbye to Norma's house and garden.

"What would you have done," I asked, as we passed the turnoff to Mora Bay, "if I hadn't come last Saturday to find out why the phone was out of order?"

"Cal was supposed to drop by or phone later that day," Maggie said. "If he didn't, I'd have walked up the hill to Rollin RV Park and asked to use their phone."

"I hadn't thought of that. I guess I was focusing on how awful it would have been for you to sleep on the floor in an unheated house all night."

"I'd have had plenty of heat. Three cats and a dog, all trying to keep warm themselves. You worry too much, Holly, it's only September and this isn't Moose Jaw. I wouldn't have frozen to death."

It seemed odd to walk up the veranda steps without being greeted by an enthusiastic little red dachshund. When we left Holly Haven, he'd tried to climb into the car with us, but Maggie had persuaded him to stay with Nicky, who was happy to herd another dog, if given the chance. Maggie unlocked the door, and we walked through empty, echoing rooms, one by one, checking closets and cupboards. Though the sun was shining, the house felt a little chilly and smelled musty.

"It's been shut up for a week," Maggie said, as we went into Norma's bedroom. "Let's leave some windows open while we look around outside." She opened the closet and peered inside, started to close the door, then went back for another look. "Here's something the movers missed."

She hauled out a yellowed shoebox and opened it. "Oh, look, Holly, she saved drawings and printing done by a child. I wonder if these were Trevor's."

"If so," I said, "I'll take great pleasure in burning them."

"No, these are her grandsons' efforts." Maggie held up one of the sheets. "See? They've printed their names on the drawings. It will give me pleasure to phone and ask if they want these mementoes and, incidentally, tell them what led up to my finding the box."

"That would be even better. I wonder if they'll make any comments about their father's actions."

Maggie put the lid back on the box. "I doubt it. I'm sure they'll be disgusted but I suspect they've succeeded in distancing themselves from Trevor. They're both at university and neither has lived at home for three or four years. They may be building lives that are completely divorced from their father and his ideas."

"They'll probably discuss what he did with each other, but perhaps they won't say anything to an outsider because they don't want to sound anything like him."

"Holly, you're right. Trevor bad-mouths everybody."

When we went outside to look at the garden, it looked odd, too, without the bench where

we'd spent so much time during the summer. "I wonder what the Heritage Society plans to do with the garden," Maggie said. "It needs only a little tidying up to be ready for next spring. There's the compost heap, too, that someone could use."

"I'll ask Ben what he thinks. He might want the compost, but I doubt he could make use of the garden. He'd spend more on gas, driving back and forth, than he'd make out of the produce."

"And we know how cost-conscious he is." Maggie stuck her head in the greenhouse door. "Oh, look! Those men left my pot plants! Do you think they actually felt sorry for me? They've taken everything else." She came out carrying two flowerpots with large, healthy-looking marijuana plants in them. "They need water."

"Ben will have a fit if you start growing pot at the cottage."

"It would be fun to tease him, wouldn't it?" Maggie said. "I'm not all that keen on smoking pot, but it would be a shame for these to go to waste. I'll give them to Cal; he smokes the odd joint."

We put the plants in the trunk of my car, the shoebox of mementoes on the back seat and took some buckets and boxes around to the back of the house to pick apples. Maggie picked from the ground; I climbed up into the branches. The fruit smelled delicious in the heat of the sun, birds sang, and I was feeling so mellow that a strange voice nearly made me fall out of the tree.

"Hello! I'm Betty Good. Is one of you Mrs. Sutton?"

"We both are," said Maggie, as I climbed out of the tree. "This is my daughter-in-law, Holly."

I shook hands with Betty Good, a short, substantial woman in a tweed pant suit. Her graying hair was in a no-nonsense bun and her blue eyes looked as if they could x-ray steel.

"I know you," she said. "You're a trustee. And I'm here on behalf of the Adriana Heritage Society. I phoned your house this morning and your husband told me where you were. Which is fortunate, because it means I can combine two things: inspect the house and get the keys from your mother-in-law."

Maggie and I left the apples and walked through the house with her. Betty kept shaking her head as she looked in the empty rooms. "Such a shame! Norma had some nice pieces. It will take some doing to find period furniture for this place."

"Did Cal Peterson tell you what happened?" I asked.

"Yes, he did. I can't remember ever being so disgusted. Trevor was always a handful, but no one would have expected something like this."

"He still is a handful," Maggie said. "He acts like a spoiled brat rather than the grown-up professional he's supposed to be. Unfortunate, because no one has the authority to tell him what to do."

"One doesn't like to interfere in other people's lives, but sometimes..." Betty broke off to admire the wainscoting in the living room, then glanced at her watch. "I'm afraid I have to go. May we lock up now so I can take the keys?"



Next day Maggie came over for Sunday dinner. When we were settled in the living room with our usual pre-dinner drinks, the aroma of roasting pork wafting in from the kitchen, Shaz came wandering down from upstairs and hopped onto Maggie's lap. They cuddled and purred at each other, though Maggie's version of purring sounded rather too much like she was clearing her throat.

"Do you think it's time the little princess went home with you?" I asked.

"Yes, please," Maggie said. She held Shaz's vibrating body against her face. "Holly, what makes cats purr? It's such a happy, soothing sound."

"It's nothing romantic or magical. Cats apparently have two membrane folds, called false vocal cords, in the larynx along with the actual vocal cords."

"There are several theories about how it works," Ben said, "but the one I just read says that purring is produced by blood vibrating in a large vein in the chest cavity. The vibration is then magnified by air in the windpipe."

"You're quite right," Maggie said, "that's not at all romantic. I think what I should have asked, is why do they purr?"

"You can feel Shaz's body vibrating when she purrs." I said. "Kittens are born blind and deaf and they know instinctively that the vibrations of their mother's body are signaling them to nurse."

"When do the kittens start purring?" Maggie asked.

"At about a week old, according to this book I'm reading," Ben said. "It says that the purring of the kittens is a signal back to the mother that they're getting milk, and everything is fine. The neat part is that the purring is done internally, so it doesn't interfere with the kitten sucking or breathing."

"We think of purring as contentment," I said, "but that isn't always so. Cats purr when they're in pain, too. I remember, years and years ago, before I met Ben, when one of my cats broke her leg and I took her to the vet. She purred the whole time until the vet put her under."

"I hope my pretty girl purrs when I take her home," Maggie said.

"There's a guaranteed way of making her purr," I said. "Give her a hair-pulling ruff."

Maggie frowned. "That doesn't sound pleasant."

I explained how I did Shaz's special ruff and then demonstrated.

"Oh, I see," Maggie said. "You're just using the handfuls of hair as a grip so you can gently move her skin." She knelt and took over while Shaz purred like a small motorboat and stretched so that Maggie could attend to every part of her body.

Later we walked Maggie back to the cottage, carrying Shaz. Maggie said, "I doubt if Doran will purr when he sees that he has a new house-mate."

He didn't, of course. When Maggie put Shaz down on the living room floor, Doran's fur fluffed up to make him seem twice as big and he growled at the kitten.

"Do you think he'll attack?" Maggie looked worried.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed that she's still young enough for him to regard her as a kitten, not a threat to his kingdom." I guessed her age at about seven months, and she was certainly too small to be a threat to anyone.

Shaz didn't seem at all worried. Like Kaylie, faced with the same situation as a tiny kitten, Shaz sat down and looked benignly at the three cats staring at her. Doran stalked a little closer and hissed.

Ben knelt, petted Shaz, and offered his hand to the other three to sniff. "They probably just want to make sure she knows she's bottom feline on the cat tree."

Doran hissed and growled. Shaz stared at him with her big, blue eyes. Smoke yawned and wandered off to the laundry room, where the food dishes were kept. Blue Eyes walked up to the kitten, sniffed her, then followed Smoke.

"So, we're down to Prince Doran defending the kingdom against an invading horde of one Ragdoll kitten," I said. "Come on, Bad Boy, get over yourself."

"Huff!" he said, and walked away, ears back and a scowl on his face.

"All right, Maggie," I said. "As long as Shaz doesn't overstep any boundaries, like eating out of Doran's food dish, she'll be fine."

"I wonder what BJ will think," Maggie said.

"I'm sure that the cats taught BJ long ago that he is as much their servant as any of the humans," I said.

"I wonder where she'll sleep," Maggie said. "The other three have already sorted out their places. Smoke and Blue Eyes curl up on either side of me so that I can't move and Doran sleeps anywhere he pleases."

"Maggie," I said, "you worry too much."



I spent some of the following two weeks painting the interior of the cottage. Out of what seemed like hundreds of possible white and off-white choices, Maggie had picked Devon Cream, a rich cream color that picked up the warm tones in the Fire Dance kitchen tile and the laminated maple wood flooring in the living and dining rooms and the bedrooms. The paint was expensive but so thick and smooth, like real Devon cream, that it was a pleasure to work with. Not only that, but since I hadn't removed the masking tape I'd put on doors, windows and floors when doing the base coat, the fiddliest job didn't have to be done again.

While I painted, Ben and Maggie went to Victoria to buy drapes, a couch and order furniture for the spare bedroom. By the time they got back, I'd finished the living room and, with the drapes and wall art hung, it finally looked like a home. It added to the atmosphere, of course, to have cats sprawled everywhere.

The next rooms I did were the kitchen and dining room, which were the worst because we had to cover the counters and appliances with old sheets. It didn't matter how careful I was with brush or roller, I usually managed to spatter paint somewhere, and always on myself.

One gloomy morning, with rain blowing against the patio doors, I was up on the stepladder, cutting in on the ceiling above the kitchen cupboards, when I felt something warm brush my ankles. I looked down to find Doran already two steps above my feet and headed for the paint tray.

"Maggie! Can you grab this cat?" I was afraid he would step in the paint tray and knock it over. Latex paint is easy to get off, but only if it isn't dry and you haven't spilled a quart of it.

Doran was only one step below the paint tray when Maggie lifted him off the ladder. Tail lashing, ears back, he marched off to the cat run. "Like you said a few months ago, Doran always has to be where the action is," she said, "looking at it, climbing on it, sniffing it, or making comments."

"I wonder if that's part of his Maine Coon heritage. I notice that he comes when you call him, and he likes to be around you. He's almost doglike in that way, though I wouldn't dare make a statement like that where he could hear me."

"He doesn't mind dogs," Maggie said. "Or, rather, he doesn't mind BJ as long as the dog behaves himself. But strange dogs are a different matter. He was very upset about Nicky being on the patio the other day."

"I'd have thought he'd be used to seeing Nicky by now."

"Apparently that's going to take more than two weeks," Maggie said. "I went out the sliding door and started petting Nicky. He's such a lovely, furry boy and he doesn't smell doggy, like

most dogs do. Doran was looking out the kitchen door – I had it open to get rid of the paint smell, but the screen was shut – and he began wailing."

"Not growling?"

Maggie shook her head. "Wailing as if his heart would break. It sounded as though he was accusing me of not loving him anymore and intending to abandon him forever because I liked that ugly white dog more than him."

"Goodness! And I thought Kaylie was the biggest drama queen I'd ever met."

"If she's queen of drama, he's king," Maggie said. "Yesterday I heard him literally screaming in the cat run and I rushed to the door and looked out, sure he'd fallen off the cat tree and was hurt. But he was just angry because a strange cat had dared to walk on his property, and he was threatening to murder it."

"Was it one of mine?" I hadn't witnessed any further posturing and growling between Doran and George but, much as I loved watching how cats interacted and settled their differences, I did have other things to do with my life.

"No," Maggie said, "it was Daisy, Cal's calico cat. She looks like a Halloween decoration, you know, with all that orange and black fur."

"She does like to tease animals that can't get at her," I said. "She used to drive Midnight, the Trafford's big black poodle, absolutely insane when he was locked up in his pen." I climbed down the ladder and shifted it over three feet to do the next bit.

"After Daisy left," Maggie said, "Doran had to come back in and get rid of his frustrated aggression by smacking Blue Eyes. She has an enormous amount of patience. Sometimes she smacks him back, but usually she can see when he's in a temper and she hides somewhere until he's over it."

"Has he smacked Shaz yet?"

"Not that I know of," Maggie said. "I might smack her myself if she doesn't stop having races with herself at four in the morning and yowling when she loses. Did she do that when she lived with you?"

"Quite often. It appears that the princess is happy in her new home."

"I think what you mean, Holly, is that she's the new ruler around here and eager to celebrate. She was just wild last night. Or I should say this morning, about five. She tore around the house, talking and chirruping, with her tail pointed straight up, and tried to kill every scratching post in the place. Then she bounced up on the bed, bleating at me that it was time for her ruff."

"She'll grow out of it. Maybe. Has she found a place to sleep?"

"She sleeps everywhere, but mostly on my bed. She seems to have settled in all right because when she's awake, she's usually around with the other cats or looking decorative on top of the fridge. I really don't want her up there, but she's so beautiful that I haven't the heart to make her get down."

"She'd just wait until you were out and do it anyway," I said. "By the way, since she must be seven or eight months old now, it's definitely time to get her spayed. I'm sure you don't want to suffer the agony of her screaming through a heat for two weeks, the way Kaylie did."

"I'm ahead of you for once, Holly. I made an appointment with Jerry for next week. Cal's going to drive us into town."

"On the motorcycle?"

"Never! Shaz is too much of a lady to ride on a motorcycle. And she'd get her fur all ruffled, which she hates."

"And you're not a lady?" I teased.

Maggie smiled. "I may look and sound like one, but if being a lady means being conventional, then I am certainly not one."

"Do you really like the bike?" I moved the stepladder again.

"It's very sporty and it is rather fun. But I don't get to see very much because Cal's back is in the way."

"Does it make you feel like you're twenty again?" I asked.

"No," she said, "my bones creak too much and I don't have the stamina that I used to think I'd never lose. All Cal and I are doing is wearing elaborate costumes to pretend to other people that we're young. I can't fool myself."

"Do you think Cal is fooling himself?"

"I haven't decided yet," Maggie said. "He is a very practical man, with plenty of common sense, but there's no doubt he's having a wonderful time when he puts on his helmet and boots and roars around on that bike."

"Maybe riding a motorcycle is something he's always wanted to do and he's just doing it while he still can."

"Maybe. Let's wait and see."

The cat door rattled and two seconds later Doran marched into the kitchen, lifting his paws high between each step, and complaining.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

Maggie went into the laundry room and came back with a battered old towel. She picked Doran up and dried his feet. "The wind is blowing rain into the cat pen. He was telling me I should have dried the grass off before he walked on it."



Most people would have called the public hearing for the zoning bylaw a reasonably peaceful affair, but as soon as Deanna and Peter Perry, owners of Rollin RV Park, walked in with Trevor Brentwood and sat near the front, my stomach tied itself in knots. Trevor was tight-lipped and scowling, obviously furious about something. I was afraid he'd rant about his mother's old property, but it was his wife's sister, Deanna, who stood up and complained bitterly about Norma's farm being zoned as park and farmland. I wondered if she was speaking for herself or whether Trevor might have coached her in a last-ditch effort to keep the bylaw from being passed.

The crowd was silent, and Duff responded to her complaints. "Mrs. Perry, I would have thought that having a waterfront park with old growth timber next door would draw more people with recreational vehicles to your site."

She stood up again. "The only way we'll get more people is if there's a marina in that bay and a golf course in place of those empty fields. People don't want to stare at the ocean; they want something to do."

Some people need to be entertained, I thought, but for many of us, a vacation spent on the beach, watching the waves roll in, is exactly what we want. Ben and I hadn't had a holiday in a couple of years and the idea of sitting on a peaceful beach with absolutely nothing to do was appealing. But it had to be a warm beach, with sunshine, not chilly, damp Adriana rocks in October, with misty rain falling.

The meeting went on. I doodled nervously on my agenda and waited for Trevor to stand up and make a speech. Strangely, he didn't. Eventually my stomach calmed down enough for me to

wonder where his wife was, then remember what Maggie had said about the young blonde woman with him when he raided Norma's house. Perhaps his wife wasn't the only woman waiting for him tonight.

After answering questions and discussing various points for a couple of hours, Duff adjourned the meeting and we headed for The Yellow Duck. It was warm and cozy in the bar and I began to feel a little better about the rain and even optimistic about the fate of the bylaw. We'd done the best we could.

Ben, Duff, Joanna, and I sat at a small window table where we could watch the wharf lights shimmering on wet planks and reflecting from black water. Ben ordered a round. "You three deserve a drink. You've worked hard on this thing."

Duff leaned back in his chair. "I think the bylaw will pass. None of the objections we heard tonight were serious."

"Some of them were downright frivolous," Joanna said. "Like that man with a lot smack dab in the middle of a residential area who wanted to have it zoned as commercial merely because he *might* want to start a business someday."

"Oh, he's anti everything," Duff wiped beer foam off his lips. "You all heard me explain that he can apply for a change in the zoning for his property if he decides to go into business and that it will be considered based on the conditions at that time. But when I came out of the hall, he was still muttering to his buddies about it."

"What I'm afraid of," I said, "is that a lot of the people in favor won't vote because they think the bylaw is a sure thing. We could still see it voted down by a bunch of nay-sayers. And why did Trevor Brentwood come to the meeting if he wasn't going to say anything?"

"Holly, you worry too much," Ben said. "Stop being realistic for once and drink your beer. There isn't one more single thing you can do tonight to push that bylaw through."

"I could stand up on the table and yell at everybody to vote."

"A lot of them wouldn't know what you were talking about," Duff said. "As for Trevor, maybe he's a masochist. Maybe he likes wallowing in the knowledge that he can't own and develop the old farm."

"Tonight, he looked like he wanted to kill somebody. I was afraid it might be me."

"Speak of the devil," Joanna said.

I turned to see Trevor, Deanna, and Peter walking to a table at the far side of the room. As they sat down, Trevor signaled the waiter with an imperious wave of his hand.

"Mitch isn't going to appreciate a demanding customer tonight," I said. Mitch was the owner of The Yellow Duck, no doubt working the floor because of the crowd who'd gathered to rehash the public hearing.

Duff rose. "That's Mitch's problem. Excuse me, the washroom calls."

When he came back, he was grinning.

"What?" Ben said.

Duff sat, leaned across the table, and said in a low voice, "Talked to my cousin Joe in the can. Found out what Trevor was looking so mad about."

"What?" I clutched my beer.

"Trevor and the Perrys went to The Apple Tree for dinner tonight," Duff said, "and the hostess wouldn't seat them. She said all the tables were reserved. Which Joe said was nonsense, because he and his wife had walked in half an hour before, without a reservation, and had no problem getting a table. And the place was half empty."

"So did they have to leave?" I asked. I didn't know whether it was the story or the beer, but

my stomach was back to normal, and I thought I might even be able to smile.

"No point them staying, was there?" Duff was still grinning. "There are other places in town you can get dinner. Or you can if you're not Trevor Brentwood."

"Why would the hostess do that?" Ben asked. "Is there some relationship here that I don't know about?"

"She's the daughter of one of Norma's old friends," Duff said. "Thanks to the island network, I'd bet everybody knows about Trevor stripping the house and sending everything to the dump."

"I love it!" I couldn't help smiling now. "It's far less than he deserves, but I'm going to enjoy thinking about that for a long time."

There was a roar from the other end of the room, and I turned to look. Trevor was standing by his table, the front of his pants soaked from the stomach downward. Beer dripped on the floor. The place had gone quiet, and I could hear Mitch saying, "Oh, I *am* sorry, sir! That was very clumsy of me. I'll get you a towel."

Trevor made an obscene remark about Mitch and his towel and stalked out the door, the Perrys right behind him. All of them were glowering.

My smile gave way to laughter. "Oh, what a wonderful island! I'm so grateful for the network. I must thank Cal when I see him next."

Duff looked smug. "He's not the only one." He glanced at his watch. "I think it's time I went home. Besides, I think we've had all the fun we're going to get tonight. Holly, do you want to set a date for the vote now or wait until our meeting next Thursday? We need to advertise it in the *Advocate*."

I put the laptop on the table and brought up the calendar. "What about November fourth? Three weeks away."

"That's pushing it," Duff said, "but the information will still be fresh in people's minds. All right, I think we can manage that."

"It would be a good idea to send a notice to all the landowners, too," Joanna said, "worded in such a way that they understand the importance of getting out and voting."

"You can do that, Holly," Duff said. "You're the writer in the crowd."

"Oh, sure. What I feel like saying is 'Vote for this bylaw or I'll put out a contract on you.'"

Duff smiled. "Is that how you keep your cats in line? With threats?"

"It's the other way around," I said. "They keep me in line. And they don't waste time making threats. They go for the gusto, like ripping hell out of my best chair."

"Maybe we should send your cats around to remind everyone about the bylaw vote." Duff raised his glass. "Here's to a positive result."

We all drank to that. In the silence that followed, Duff said, "Did you know that your body gives off enough heat in thirty minutes to bring half a gallon of water to a boil?"

"If Adriana doesn't approve that bylaw," I said, "I'll be able to do it in thirty seconds."



XV -- Escaped Convict

Despite the previous night's excitement, I woke early on Sunday morning, remembered what had happened the night before and started smiling again. Trevor Brentwood getting a glass of beer dumped in his lap and being barred from The Apple Tree were memories that would go on making me smile for the rest of my life. As soon as the cats saw my eyelids flutter, they began coaxing me to get up and feed them and still I smiled. At eight-thirty they finished breakfast and went out to do their rounds. I wandered through the house in my dressing gown, drinking the first coffee of the day. The sun was shining, Ben and Nicky were happily snoring on the bed, and I felt downright mellow.

Someone rapped at the back door and my mellow mood evaporated. Who on earth would visit this early? Not even Cal would have the gall to do that. It couldn't be Maggie; she liked to sleep in, too.

I opened the back door to Constable Russ Parsons of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the organization that battled crime on Adriana. Not that there was usually much crime to battle, other than speeders, noisy Saturday night parties and, occasionally, a grow op. "Mrs. Sutton?" he said. "Mrs. Ben Sutton?"

Oh my God! Had he found out about Maggie's pot plants? No, the RCMP wouldn't chase after anything that insignificant. Or would they?

But there he stood on my doorstep, wearing his navy forage cap, with its yellow band around the crown, freshly pressed navy, yellow-striped trousers, and a bomber jacket. I'd seen him around and someone had told me who he was and that he'd been posted to Adriana for only about a year.

"Come in," I said. "How can I help you?"

He stood by the kitchen table, his posture unrelentingly stiff, and said, "Is your husband at home? Has he been home all night?"

I blinked. What on earth would the cops want with Ben? "Yes, of course," I said. "Why?"

"An act of vandalism took place last night and he was named as the possible perpetrator."

"Vandalism? It couldn't be Ben; he doesn't even break speed limits."

Constable Parsons remained stern. "Sometime between eleven last night and six this morning, someone let all the air out of the tires on Mr. Trevor Brentwood's Mercedes-Benz convertible, which was parked at Rollin RV Park."

I couldn't help it; I started to laugh. I leaned against the refrigerator and laughed until the tears ran down my face.

"Ma'am?" said the cop. "He missed the first ferry to Victoria."

I laughed again, then gulped as I tried to control the giggles that kept sneaking up my throat and trying to get out. "That is too bad! The sooner Mr. Brentwood leaves this island, the happier everyone will be. Was the car damaged?" Trevor was sure to be fond of his silvery sand Mercedes, an elegant symbol of the man he thought he was.

"No."

"Then he got off lucky," I said. "Look, Constable, why don't you sit down and have a coffee with me? I don't know who let the air out of Trevor's tires, but I certainly know why it was done."

Parsons sat at the table, still a little stiff. I told him about Trevor being so greedy he'd tried to get his mother certified as mentally incompetent so that he could get control of her land. I told

him about Norma's illness and death and her deeding the land to the Islands Trust. Then about Trevor stripping the house after she died and sending everything to the dump. "That news spread around the island in hours. Norma lived here all her life and was well loved. Any one of at least a couple of hundred people could have messed with Trevor's car."

Constable Parsons had made notes as I talked and now looked a little more relaxed. He removed his cap.

"Was Mr. Brentwood very upset?" I asked. "He had a bad day yesterday. First he was refused service at the best restaurant in town and then the waiter at The Yellow Duck spilled a full glass of beer in his lap."

"He appeared to be extremely distressed this morning," said Parsons, with a little smile at his coffee mug.

I put a plate of ginger snaps on the table. "Too bad he missed the first ferry, but he probably made the second one. I doubt if he'll be back."

The constable took a cookie. "I hope none of the islanders on that ferry takes a notion to push Mr. Brentwood over the railing. It'll mean more work for us."

"Nobody would go that far," I said. "Trevor isn't worth a prison term."

Ben wandered in, pajamas wrinkled, hair sticking out in every direction, and stopped dead when he saw our visitor. "What's wrong?"

"Constable Parsons says somebody let the air out of Trevor's tires."

Ben threw his head back and roared with laughter. "Perfect! I hope you never catch whoever did it." He turned and headed toward the bathroom.

"I can see this is going to be a difficult investigation," Parsons said, smiling at me. "Is there any more of that coffee, ma'am?"



The Wednesday following the public hearing was a mellow October day that made me feel as if my favorite season might go on for another two months. I put on a jacket and took my second cup of coffee out on the front veranda so I could bask in the sun and the crisp autumn air and watch maple leaves drifting down. I felt as if I could drift, too, for a while. The painting at Maggie's cottage was done and the place was fully furnished, including scratching posts in the living room and in the run. There was nothing left to do on the community plan except wait for the bylaw vote. Ben had put the garden to bed for the winter, cleaned up the greenhouse and started new seedlings.

Maybe we could take the animals and the camera and walk down to the beach. Snap some pictures, find some oysters, or just breathe. Have a day off, in other words. I slumped back in the deck chair and tried to remember the last time I'd had a whole day with nothing to do. Except feed assorted two-legged and four-legged animals, of course.

"Holly!" Maggie's voice. "Holly!" She sounded desperate.

I went through the house to find her in the kitchen. "What's wrong?" She looked close to crying.

"It's Doran. He escaped. I don't know where he is."

Suddenly I no longer wanted my coffee. If we lost Bad Boy Doran, I'd never forgive myself for not doing whatever it was I should have done to keep him safe. I left the half-full cup in the laundry room and followed Maggie to the cottage.

As soon as we went into the run through the outside door, I could see what had happened.

Either Derek or Cal had forgotten to secure the wire mesh beside the bottom of one corner post. The gap wasn't big, but cats have rubber skeletons and can wriggle through very small spaces. A wisp of grey fur hung from the bottom wire, where Doran had scraped his back on the way out.

"I'll get Ben to come and nail that wire on right now," I said. "We don't want the other three escaping." Smoke and Blue Eyes were adorning the top shelf of a cat tree, blinking at us, and pretending they didn't know what all the fuss was about. "Where's Shaz?"

"I'll check in the house," Maggie said.

She came back quickly, looking relieved. "She's asleep under my bed."

I left Maggie on guard and hurried to the greenhouse to tell Ben what had happened. Five minutes later he brought a hammer and nails from the workshop and eliminated Doran's escape hatch.

"I'd better check the fastenings all the way around," he said. "We don't want this happening again."

"Maggie and I will start looking for Doran," I said. I was glad Ben's arm was healed enough to use a hammer. He was still going for physiotherapy, but he could do most things, though lifting or carrying heavy weights was still forbidden.

"Maggie, I'll go back to our driveway and out to the road and call him from there. He might have crossed the road to Dyckman's or Trafford's. Why don't you go along the fence line toward the beach and call him?"

I didn't want to tell Maggie, but I was afraid of finding Doran's body on the road, the victim of a hit and run. He would have learned about cars from exploring the lane that dead-ended at Norma's house, but he wouldn't have known how fast they could go on a straight through road. I thought all kinds of awful things as I walked up our driveway, past the impenetrable blackberry hedge, to look out on the road. I kept calling, "Doran! Bad Boy! Come and see me."

No awful sights were in evidence when I reached the road. And no Doran appeared, either, as I walked down as far as Dyckman's gate. Half a dozen of Ken's Holstein cows came and stuck their heads over the fence, perhaps under the impression that I was talking to them. I stopped and listened, hoping to hear an answering meow but all I could hear was Maggie calling and Ben tapping with the hammer.

Should I keep going? We didn't know how long Doran had been out. If he'd gone through the wire during the night, he could be miles away by now. I turned around and went back down my driveway. I had to hope that he'd stay on our property, close to his cat friends and his food dish.

Ben was returning the hammer to his workshop. "There was just that one bit of the wire that hadn't been fastened properly," he said. "No sign of him out on the road?"

"No. I'm going to search the outbuildings. It's possible he could have come into our house through the cat door, but our cats would have raised hell right away, so I'm sure he's not in there."

"I'll go down the north fence line. He might be hiding somewhere if he ran into a raccoon. I'd better shut the dogs up, too. Doran knows he can order BJ around, but he hasn't had the chance to learn that Nicky is just as much of a pushover." Ben began to walk away. "I just hope he doesn't tangle with Cal's goats."

I searched the carport, workshop, chicken house and greenhouse, looking up, looking down, looking under, looking behind, calling in my sweetest voice, but there was no Doran. The more I searched, the more I feared he'd headed across country for Norma's place. Fifteen miles was a long way, even for a determined cat.

For a while, Cato, Caesar, and Poppy followed me, curious because I was doing something unusual, but after twenty minutes they got bored and began chasing each other up and down the pear and cherry trees in the old orchard.

The sky was clouding over when I joined Ben and Maggie to search through the trees and brush at the bottom of our property and across the road allowance to the beach. I was relieved that George had decided to stay home and keep an eye on Kaylie to prevent her achieving a palace coup. We frightened a few birds and disturbed a couple of squirrels busily burying acorns, but there were no cats anywhere. And no yowls from one looking to be rescued.

As we walked back up the meadow, it started to rain. "Do you think we should check with the neighbors?" I asked.

"Not yet," Ben said. "They all have cats, except for the Traffords, and I doubt if Doran would go into another cat's territory for long. My feeling is that he's close by and will turn up when he gets hungry enough."

"It's time the humans had some lunch at least," I said. "There's leftover roast from last night. I'll make sandwiches." I'd let the dogs out for a run, too.

Maggie said, "I'll be over in a minute. I want to go back to the cottage to see if Doran is anywhere around. He might have come back while we were down at the beach."

When she came in and sat at the kitchen table ten minutes later, she looked tired and discouraged. "This is so awful, Holly. Do you think he'll ever come back? I couldn't bear to lose my gray boy."

This was the woman who hadn't even liked cats when she first came to stay with us two and a half years before. "We lost Cato, and he turned up, just like the proverbial bad penny. Maybe Doran will, too."

"That was different," Ben said. "Cato didn't want to run away. Doran did."

I scowled at him. "Don't be a pessimist. Doran didn't want to run away. He was just curious about what was on the other side of the wire screen. White bread or wholewheat for your sandwich?"

"White," Ben said.

"Wholewheat," Maggie said. "Holly, what are you putting on mine?"

"Cheese. Why?"

"Oh, all right. I thought for a minute you forgot I'm vegetarian," she said. "I wonder why cats are curious."

"It's because they're hunters by instinct," Ben said. "They're always looking for food, even if we feed them more than they can ever eat. Which is probably why Cato climbed in the back of that delivery truck."

"Doran is certainly curious," Maggie said. "He always follows me around to see what I'm doing and wants to get in the middle of whatever it is. It can be very difficult to make the bed when he's feeling energetic." She sighed. "But even more than wanting to snoop, he hates being restricted. That's why I'm afraid he won't come back."

"Don't give up hope," Ben said, as he plugged in the coffeepot. "I thought I'd learned everything there is to know about cats, but they still surprise me."

We sat down to our sandwiches and Ben tried to distract us from worrying about Doran by holding forth on federal politics, but gave up when he realized it wasn't working. Afterward, we shut the dogs up again, put on rain slickers and rubber boots and went back to calling and searching all the places we'd already searched.

We quit at four and came back to the house to get dry, warm up and let Nicky and BJ out

again. "That poor baby is out there getting wet and cold," Maggie said. "I'm going to start phoning the neighbors, Ben. I suppose they'll think we're stupid because we keep losing cats, but I don't care."

"All right," Ben said. "I'll pour drinks as soon as I've made a visit to my own litter box."

"Phone Cal first," I said to Maggie, "and invite him for a drink, too. In fact, you might as well invite him for supper. I'll make spaghetti. There's homemade sauce thawing in the fridge."

"I'm not hungry." Maggie picked up the phone.

Cal came in ten minutes later. "BJ is over at the cottage raising a ruckus."

"I wonder if he wants to go inside the cottage," Maggie said. "Perhaps I'd better go dry him off and put him in."

"I'll do it." Cal put his cap back on.

He was back, with a grin on his face, before Ben had drinks poured. "BJ found Doran. That dumb cat is up on the roof."

"Oh, thank heavens!" Maggie exclaimed, her hand to her heart. "I'll kill that little beast when I get my hands on him."

Ben put down the scotch bottle. "Well, come on. Let's go get him while it's still light enough to see what we're doing. Has the rain let up, Cal?"

"No." Cal turned toward the door. "I'll get the ladder from the workshop."

We put our slickers back on and trekked over to the cottage. "Where is he? I don't see him," I said.

Cal set the ladder on the patio. "He's hiding in one of the air vents. See that little white face looking out?"

"Now I do!" Maggie said. "I really will kill him. He's tucked in there out of the rain and we're all out here getting wet. I wonder how he got up there."

Cal started up the ladder. "No problem for a cat. He probably went straight up one of the support posts for the cat run, using the wire mesh to hook his claws into, and then onto the roof of the run and the house roof."

"I wonder if Cal can get him out of the vent," I said.

"Holly, you worry too much," Maggie said. "Cal can do anything."

"Besides," Ben said, "Doran can't get any further in than he is already. There's a screen behind him, cutting off access to the attic."

Cal was closing in on the air vent. He yelled over his shoulder, "Come up the ladder, Ben. I can't hang onto this cat and get back on the ladder, too. Not enough hands."

By the time Ben was halfway up the ladder, Cal was back to the edge of the roof, cursing and hanging on to a struggling, growling Doran. "Watch it, Ben. This guy is ready to claw somebody to death."

"I told you," Maggie said, "I told you he hates being restricted."

"He just wants to go on being a fierce, feral jaguar in the driving rain." I steadied the ladder for Ben. "Be careful or he'll drag you off to his lair and chew on your bones."

Cal handed Doran to Ben while I braced the ladder as best I could. Ben came down a few steps. "Holly, can you hold him? He's awfully strong."

"I can hold him. Maggie, get ready to open the sliding door."

Ben handed Doran to me, Maggie opened the door, and I flung Doran into her living room and slammed the door shut.

"I wish we could have got him to come down on his own," Maggie said. "But I don't suppose anybody wanted to stand outside in the rain waving an open can of tuna at him."

"You got that right." Water dripped off Cal's cap. "I'm soaking wet as it is."

Doran was nowhere in sight when we followed Maggie into her living room. "I'll get a towel and dry him off." She looked worried. "I hope he didn't catch a chill."

"Daisy spends most of her time outside," Cal said, "and the only things she catches are mice and birds."

Ben went into St. Francis mode. "You're taking a chance letting her run free." Cal ignored him.

Maggie took a towel from the bathroom, caught Doran, and brought him into the living room where she managed to towel him off a bit before he struggled out of her hands. "He's still wet and dirty."

Shaz emerged from Maggie's bedroom, looked at Doran and wrinkled her nose as if to say, "Ee-uw!" Doran smacked her hard and stalked out the cat door into the run. Shaz picked herself up, blinking, and Maggie cuddled her. "Never mind, pretty girl. He's just in a really bad mood."

"I vote for that drink," I said. "Now we can celebrate instead of worrying."

"A very good idea, Holly." Maggie put Shaz down. "I'm ravenous, too."

We were just about to slip out the back door when we heard a mighty yowling from the pen. Maggie rushed to the door. "Do you suppose he hurt himself somehow when he was out, and we didn't notice?"

We followed her and looked into the pen. Doran was standing at the spot in the wire where he'd got out before and wailing as if his world was about to end.

I looked at Maggie. "Doran's as determined to get his own way as some people we know."



Next morning, I went over to the cottage to see how the recaptured escapee was dealing with his imprisonment. He'd obviously spent considerable time grooming himself because his white cheeks, nose, and the blaze on his forehead were once again spotless. So were his white feet and chest. His dark gray tail also had been freshly laundered and fluffed into an upright, perky beacon.

As soon as I sat down, he climbed into my lap, purring, and licked my nose. "You're certainly in a better frame of mind," I said. He purred louder, like a demented little lawn mower, and put a paw on my cheek to keep my nose where he could get at it.

"I'm glad you're safe, clean and dry," I said, "so I'll let you lick my nose. Though I truly do not want my face to smell like tuna." I looked at Maggie, who was sitting on the couch and beaming at the love-in. "I suppose you gave him a tuna treat to make him feel better about being confined again."

"How could I not? When he went out into the pen this morning, he was wailing at the wire again. But he came right in when I called him." She watched him licking my nose for a few seconds. "I notice his ears are positioned differently depending on what's going on for him. Right now, they're pointed forward and a bit outward. I assume that means he's relaxed."

"That's right," I said. "If they were erect and pointed straight forward, he'd be ready to investigate something he could hear, see, or smell. Last night, when we were getting him off the roof, his ears were flattened against his head, which meant he was mad and ready to fight."

"And when he got away from me, after I'd tried to towel him down, they were twitching back and forth. Is that something else again?"

"I think it means he was agitated or anxious. Maybe both. Agitated because he wasn't getting

his own way and anxious to see if he could get out to the run and escape again."

Doran finished bathing my nose, jumped down and walked away, his plume of a tail waving slightly at the tip. When I came back from washing my face in the bathroom, I asked, "Why are you so interested in learning how to read feline physical signals?"

"Now that I'm settled in my new home," Maggie said, "I've been doing more thinking about starting a cat shelter and it would help if I was able to read cats' reactions and emotions."

"Are you sure you want to take on something like that when Doran is so territorial?"

"He'll mellow as he gets older."

I thought that was an interesting comment coming from Maggie, who showed no sign whatsoever of mellowing. I was sure she was a lot more acerbic and outspoken now than she had been as a young woman. "But what are you going to do until that happens?"

"I can use the guest bedroom for my cat guests. I've given this some thought, Holly, and I wouldn't take in more than one cat at a time or, if I did, it would be a mother cat and her kittens. It would be more a foster home than a shelter, because I'd find homes for them, then take in another stray."

"If you kept them in the second bedroom, they'd be safe enough. I keep wondering where Doran went when he got out or if he went up on the roof straightaway."

"He's never going to tell us," Maggie said. "I'd want my strays to have access to the run, too, not just the bedroom."

"First you'll have to let them get acquainted with your own crew. They'll do that by sniffing and growling through the bedroom door. Then gradually integrate them into the rest of the house. There's bound to be hissing and spitting until the new cat learns the established hierarchy." I was in favor of Maggie being a foster mom to stray cats, not only for the sake of the cats but because it would give her something useful to do, a way to feel needed, now that she didn't have Norma to look after.

Maggie rose and looked out the sliding door. The sky was gray, but the sun was bright enough to appear as a pale yellow circle behind the clouds. "Perhaps we'll get some sunshine today after all." She turned to me. "I did talk to the SPCA about taking in strays and they thought it was a fine idea. I also asked Jerry about it when I took Shaz in to be spayed and he said he'd give me a deal on whatever vet services my strays might need."

"How was Shaz when you put her in the carrier?" I'd told Maggie about Shaz being terrified when I'd taken her in to see Jerry in the spring.

"She was a brave little girl. She panted a bit in the carrier, but when Jay got her on the table, she snuggled against me and looked up at me when I reassured her and told her how good she was being."

"I have a theory that talking to cats in a calm and approving tone of voice actually helps keep them calm."

"I don't know if it helped Shaz but it certainly helped me," Maggie said. "I did what you suggested and gave her a Gravol pill in butter half an hour before we left and also put the little blanket from the foot of my bed in the carrier. I think both those things made her calmer."

"With care, perhaps she'll grow out of her terror. Has she forgiven you for taking her to the vet?"

Maggie laughed. "Oh, indeed! Last night we had our usual cuddle, and she was lying beside me on the bed. I was just drifting off when she walked up my body, said, 'Prrrt!' and licked my nose. Then she said, 'Prrrt!' again and left."

"That's a clear statement that she loves you."

"She's a precious girl," Maggie said. "Holly, I seem to recall you telling me that I'd have to get permission from the trustees to run a cat shelter."

"If you were running a regular animal shelter and housing many animals, and soliciting donations and all the rest of it, possibly even paying wages for someone to help, then yes, you'd have to get permission, the same as an ordinary business," I said. "But if you're only going to shelter one or two cats at a time and find homes for them, I don't think that would require a permit." I stood up and brushed the cat hair off my jeans. "The regular meeting is tomorrow. I'll ask Duff and Joanna for an opinion."

"Why don't you have the meeting here in the cottage?" Maggie said. "Then they can see for themselves that the place is suitable for fostering cats."

"Neither of them has any experience with cats," I said, "and you and I don't have any experience with fostering, but I still think it's a good idea. They might like the change, too. I'll call them tonight."



Duff and Joanna arrived at the cottage next morning at ten. Maggie showed them around and they admired the cat run, occupied as usual at this hour by Doran, Smoke, and Blue Eyes. As soon as we settled around the dining room table, with coffee and cookies provided by Maggie, Doran marched in to do an inspection of the intruders. He allowed himself to be petted by everyone, then went back out to the cat run.

"Shaz lives here now," I said, "but, as she always does with strangers, she's retreated to her lair so that she doesn't have to be bothered with boring social duties."

Duff looked interested. "Oh, is that the undercover kitten? I suppose she's spying on our meeting again?"

"She's no doubt listening with great interest to what you all have to say," Maggie said. "Maybe she has a tape recorder under that couch, though. I'll have to check." She put on a jacket. "I'll be at your house, Holly. You know where the cookies are if you want more."

After Maggie left, Duff took the correspondence from his briefcase, I opened the laptop, and we settled down to our routine business. When that was finished, I said, "Maggie wants to foster stray cats. She doesn't need a permit for that, does she?"

"Well now." Duff looked solemn. "Perhaps we should have her fill out an application. We need certain key information, such as whether she intends to discriminate on the basis of sex, color, or age."

"Duff, stop it." Joanna turned to me. "Of course she doesn't need permission. I assume you'll make sure she doesn't turn into one of those batty old ladies who adopts every cat she sees and ends up living with fifty of them."

"Depend on it. I'd never subject cats to that kind of crowding and tension."

"Anyway, from what I've seen of your mother-in-law," Joanna said, "I doubt if she'll ever become a batty old lady."

As she spoke, a giant pink paper clip spun across the floor and stopped beside the scatter rug in front of the sliding door. "Shaz is sending a signal," I said. "Maybe she's finished gathering information and wants to play."

Sure enough, Shaz scooted out from under the couch and chased the paper clip. She managed to bury it under the scatter rug, then scrunched the rug up into a messy heap as she dug it out again.

"Diversionary tactics," Joanna said, "while her fellow spy runs away with the tape recorder. Or perhaps it's still under there and she's trying to divert our attention."

Duff said, "Holly, did you know that a group of cats is called a clowder?"

"I had no idea. I've never heard of the word." My mind was still on business. "By the way, it's two weeks until the vote on the bylaw. Has either of you heard anything pro or con?"

"Holly, you worry too much." Duff rose. "Let's go to The Yellow Duck and have a beer."

Joanna followed suit. "Duff, did you know that a dog's mouth exerts from one hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds of pressure per square inch? I'll bet I could manage nearly that much with mine."

"Me, too," I said. "Especially if that bylaw doesn't pass."



XVI -- Looking for Love

Voting day, November fourth, felt chilly but pale sunshine warmed the bare branches of oak and maple and gave color to the dead leaves scattered everywhere. All day I worried that people would go golfing or boating or Christmas shopping in Victoria instead of casting their votes for the zoning bylaw. All day I paced back and forth in the high school auditorium, watching voters come and go, trying to figure out who was missing and wondering if I should phone and remind them.

When nine o'clock came and the votes were counted, I was so relieved that the bylaw had passed with a large majority that I hugged both Duff and Joanna, then retreated in embarrassment to my own side of the table.

Duff straightened his tie and grinned. "Holly, I'm sure you know that the bylaw has no effect until it's approved by the executive committee of the Trust Council."

"I don't care; I'm through worrying. The Trust Council saw the community plan and the draft of the bylaw and didn't have any objections then. Why would they now?"

"Some of the council members might have changed their minds. Perhaps Trevor has had a chance to bribe a few of them."

"Duff, stop teasing her," Joanna said. "We're done. All we have to wait for now is the official seal of approval."

"Did you know," said Duff, "that the largest cell in the human body is the female egg and the smallest is the male sperm?"

"How is that relevant?" Joanna asked.

"It isn't," he said. "I'm merely trying to abase myself so you two girls will go for a beer with me." He stood up and slid into his leather jacket. "Come on. I'm buying."



The next day was Sunday and Maggie came over late in the afternoon for drinks and dinner. She brought Shaz with her, wrapped in a small blue blanket as protection against the damp, misty day, so the kitten could visit her former housemates and practice her decorative poses for all of us to admire.

"Maggie," I said, when we'd retreated to the living room anticipating a drink, leaving the spareribs and potatoes to finish baking and the salad to chill, "have you done anything yet about the cat fostering?"

"No." She sighed. "I haven't. And I'm not going to."

"Why not?" Ben poured her a gin and tonic. "I thought that was one of the reasons you wanted the cat run built."

"That was primarily for Norma's cats," Maggie said. "I appreciate the fact that I'm allowed to foster cats if I want to, but I've decided I don't want to put up with the amount of hassle that Doran would create, not to mention the hassle that stray cats might give me. I just don't feel I have the energy to handle something like that anymore."

Ben stopped mixing drinks and stared at his mother. "Are you saying you're too old? I never thought I'd hear that from you."

"You didn't." Maggie's tone was tart. "It's not that I couldn't handle fostering if I wanted to, but I don't feel like dealing with cat spats all day."

"You go out riding on the Harley with Cal," Ben said.

"Cal does the driving. All I have to do is sit still and hang on. With Doran, it would be a psychological and physical battle twenty-four hours a day." She accepted her drink from Ben. "I've realized that my life is as full as I want it to be. The cottage, the cats, Cal, and you two keep me busy. What I want is less busyness and more time to simply enjoy the moments as they pass."

"I wondered if you were taking on too much," I said, "though I thought you'd do as good a job taking care of stray cats as you did looking after Norma." I'd watched my own mother deteriorate after her kids left home and my father died, and knew that having a purpose in life was essential. With that in mind, I'd encouraged Maggie to get involved with fostering cats. But perhaps she already had a sufficient purpose: her promise to Norma to look after animals who needed her.

"It's true cats can cause big problems, even long-standing ones." Ben handed me my scotch and sat down with a stein of beer. "You know, the only mark I'll leave for the world to remember me by is a well-cultivated garden and that won't last beyond a few months if no one keeps it up. A tomcat, on the other hand, could spray in the corner of your guest bedroom and the scent would still be there fifty years from now."

Maggie wrinkled her nose. "I'm not too old to handle something like that, but I don't have the energy I used to have."

"Less energy is a part of aging, mother."

"I know that, Benjamin. And I know growing old is a natural phenomenon, but I find it impossible to believe I'll be eighty-two next month. I'm still the same person I was twenty years ago, forty years ago, even sixty years ago. I've done a great many things since I was twenty, but I still feel like a young woman inside."

She acted and looked younger than most seventy-year-olds I knew. Riding a motorbike with Cal and keeping the roots of her auburn dye job touched up contributed to that but a bigger reason was her spirited love of life and adventure. "Do you feel betrayed by your body?"

Maggie nodded. "That's it exactly. Sometimes I look in the mirror at my wrinkles, white roots and crepey throat and simply can't believe that's me. I don't feel old mentally so why must my body look old?" She took a sip of gin and tonic. "But that's life, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Ben said. "Now that you mention the mirror thing, I remember Uncle Eric showing me a picture of a movie star born the same day as him and saying, 'I don't look as old as him, do I?'"

Maggie said, "An odd question, coming from my brother. He never used to talk about anything but cars and his hardware business. What did you say?"

Ben grinned. "I guess it was mean of me to be honest. I told him that yes, he did look as old as the movie star."

"I suspect he looked in the mirror and instead of seeing what was actually there, he saw himself as he looked when he was twenty years younger," Maggie said. "The daily changes are so small and subtle we really don't notice them."

"That reminds me of my father," I said. "He came here from England as a young man and hadn't seen his sister Beatrice since they were both in their twenties. She sent him a photo of her taken on her sixtieth birthday and he was really upset. He wouldn't let my mother put it on the mantel."

"He must have wanted to remember her as young," Maggie said. "The photo probably also reminded him that he was getting old."

"Well, it isn't any fun to realize how fast the years are going by." Ben refilled our glasses.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Maggie said. "Sometimes I enjoy sitting curled up in my easy chair with a cat in my lap and knowing that I don't have any other responsibilities, that if I start getting senile or helpless, somebody will look after me."

"Returning to the womb," I said and raised my glass. "Cheers, everybody! I guess we'll survive getting old, just like everything else."

As I rose to go check on the spareribs, I heard the kind of deep growl-yowling cats do when they're contemplating killing one another. I hurried into the kitchen to see which of my babies was intent on murder and saw George and Kaylie circling each other, hackles raised.

"Ben," I called, "they're at it again. Only I think they're serious this time." Just as Ben came in, George leapt at Kaylie, squalling and growling, ears back. Kaylie rolled over on her back to rake his belly with her hind feet, but he moved too quickly, and she missed.

"I'd better get the spray bottle," I said.

"Don't," Ben said. "This has been building up for a long time. Let them settle it."

"But..." Much as I loved my beautiful Kaylie, I didn't want to see George the Magnificent lose his position as King of Holly Haven. I never finished my sentence.

Shaz suddenly popped out from under a kitchen chair, hissed and smacked Kaylie on the head. Kaylie jumped backward, looking surprised, then fled out through the cat door, George snarling an inch from the end of her tail.

"It's all right, Holly." Maggie joined us. "He's won this battle. Remember that poem by Dylan Thomas, the one that goes:

*'Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'*"

"I remember it," I said, "and George will never go gentle into that good night. He'll hang on to his throne as long as he can."

"Instinct," Ben said. "Territory, dominance, hierarchy."

"I guess that's the difference between humans and cats," I said. "Norma didn't rage against the dying of the light, did she?"

"No," Maggie said, "she didn't. But she knew she was going; George doesn't."

"What George is raging against," Ben said, "is not death but the loss of power. Quite a different thing."

His mother smiled. "Not really."



A couple of days later, I went over to the cottage to have coffee with Maggie, bundled up in my rain jacket against the wind and rain of a typical November. When I got inside and hung up my wet coat, I saw that her cats had forsaken the cat run to sleep in warm, comfortable chairs. Suddenly I heard claws ripping at upholstery.

"Doran! Bad boy!" Maggie grabbed the newspaper from the table, but he was gone before she had time to roll it up, let alone use it. She sighed and sat down again. "Holly, is he sharpening his claws in case he has to fight somebody, or is he just doing it to aggravate me?"

"Neither. What he's doing is tearing off the ragged edges of the sheaths of his claws, so that they work efficiently."

"So that's what I'm always vacuuming up or picking out of the upholstery, those little curved bits that look like claws except they're hollow."

"Get a spray bottle," I suggested. "Fill it with water and squirt him every time you catch him doing it. Rub catnip on the scratching posts to encourage him to use those."

"Cal said I might have to declaw him."

"Whack Cal upside the head with that newspaper next time you see him. Cats need their claws. Not just for protection, either. Claws are necessary for a cat's balance and for everything they do, like climbing, stretching, and grooming. Ask Cal to imagine how he'd feel if somebody lopped his hands off."

"Extremely vulnerable, I should think," Maggie said.

"Well, that's how Doran would feel if you declawed him." I poured myself a cup of coffee. "Speaking of Cal, what happened to his bike? The last couple of times I've seen him, he was driving his pickup."

Maggie smiled. "He says the roads are too wet and dangerous in the winter to ride the Harley, so he's not going to license it again until next spring."

"I'm glad he's thinking of your safety."

"So am I," said Maggie, "but after I told him so, he admitted that it's a lot more comfortable riding in a pickup with an efficient heater in this kind of weather."

"We both know he bought that bike because he wanted to feel young. I wonder if he'll ever admit that being young can sometimes be very hard work."

"Maybe when he's ninety," Maggie said.



When I was getting ready to drive to Mora Bay for the trustee meeting on the twentieth of November, Maggie came over and asked if she could ride into town with me.

"Of course. Will you be finished with your errands in time to come and have a hamburger with us at The Yellow Duck?" I hadn't seen much of her over the past couple of weeks, so I was looking forward to catching up on our personal gossip.

"I'm sure I will," she said. "I have a little shopping to do, but my main reason for wanting to go into town is an errand I think you'll be very happy about."

"Are you going to make me guess what it is? You know my brain doesn't function until after the second coffee and I haven't had that yet."

"I don't think you could guess," she said, "no matter how many cups of coffee you drank. I've been talking to the people at the SPCA, and to Scott West at the *Advocate* and we've come up with an idea that will be a lot of fun. And, hopefully, do a lot of good."

We got into the car and fastened our seat belts. "Now I'm really curious," I said.

"Before you start the car, read this." She handed me a typed sheet, which said:

SWP (single white Persian), 2 years old, expert at decorative posing, appreciative purring. Seeks quiet, sensitive affectionate human, either sex, for a lifelong, loving relationship. I like being groomed, getting tummy rubbed, watching TV. You like tuna, chicken and sharing.

DBS (divorced black short-hair), 6 years old, sleek, sensuous, fun-loving, active. Seeking permanent home with gentle, warmhearted, financially secure female human who loves to cuddle. No dogs, please.

I laughed. "Oh, Maggie, that's wonderful. What a great way of encouraging people to adopt cats!" I put the car in gear.

"I wanted it to go in your column, in *Tidelines*," she said, "but Scott wants it under Personals. We're going to call it 'Looking For Love' and put a cat logo at the top."

"I think that's really fun. Are you going to do that for all the cats at the SPCA?"

"If that's what they want," Maggie said. "Maybe I can write something like that for the other animals, too. Dogs wouldn't be hard, though I can't imagine what romantic terms would apply to a gerbil."

We spent the rest of the drive talking about Doran's latest antics and I dropped Maggie off at the door of the *Adriana Advocate* before heading for The Yellow Duck.

When I walked into the back room, Duff and Joanna were already there. Duff greeted me with a smile. "Holly, you'll be happy to know the Trust Council has given their approval for the bylaw. Robert Geraghty phoned me last night to tell me. We don't have the official piece of paper yet, but it's been mailed. Our community plan is now written in stone, more or less."

Joanna raised her eyebrows. "At least until the next trustees are sworn in."

"You're a pessimist," Duff said. "I think this plan will hold good for a long time. And I'm quite willing to run for trustee every two years just to make sure it will. How about you, Holly?"

"I might run again next time," I said. "I know bylaws aren't written in stone and no doubt we'll have to make some amendments as we go along, but I think Norma's land is safe. And maybe fifty years down the road, the people that thought her land should be developed commercially will be glad that we still have some green space on the island."

Duff nodded. "Speaking of such people, Robert Geraghty told me some truly delightful gossip about Trevor Brentwood last night."

"And you didn't phone me right away?" I said.

"It was late," Duff said, "and I didn't think you should stay up all night celebrating."

"Duff! What's happened? What's he done?"

"It isn't what Trevor has done." Duff looked like a cat with enough tuna to last him for life. "It's what other people have done. Dr. Brentwood has been suspended from both hospitals in Victoria because he's annoyed his colleagues so much. They got fed up with his rudeness and refusal to cooperate and filed complaints with the hospital boards."

"Suspended?" I said. "Does that mean he can't practice?"

"That's what it means; no practice, no income." Duff laughed. "And the suspension won't be lifted until he apologizes to those doctors he's annoyed and generally mends his ways."

"That is utterly fantastic!" I wanted to get up and dance around the table.

"Couldn't happen to a more deserving guy." Joanna was grinning.

"That's not all," Duff said. "He's also under investigation by the BCMA. Robert said the word is that he's been doing unnecessary operations, over-billing and bad-mouthing doctors who refer patients to him."

"If the BCMA suspends his license," Joanna said, "he'll have to move to another province and apply for a license with a different medical association. I wonder how much checking they'd do. I doubt he'd be accepted if the executive knew the score."

"He might even have to move out of the country," I said. "Wouldn't that be just too, too sad?" I couldn't wait to tell Ben the news.

"Trevor may have to move, anyway," Duff said. "I doubt if he'll want to show his face at his exclusive golf club again. They've asked him to resign. Apparently, that's only the second time anyone's been asked to resign in the ninety-odd years the club has been in operation."

"Betty Good did drop a mild hint about it sometimes being necessary to interfere in people's lives. Does she have that kind of power?"

"Not personally," Duff said, "but her family does. They had money when they settled in Victoria a hundred and fifty years ago and they have a lot more of it now, not to mention prestige

that doesn't quit. You'll never hear that from her, though. She believes action speaks louder than anything else."

I thought of Shaz then, and how she'd made Kaylie stop attacking George. Maybe a good cat community was as efficient as a human community in finding ways to stop aggressive members from overstepping the bounds.

When we finished our business and went to the bar, Maggie was waiting for us, a gin and tonic in front of her.

"Wait until you hear!" I said, ordering a beer and, recklessly, a double cheeseburger. Duff repeated all the gossip for her, and she listened intently, her eyes sparkling.

"Can you imagine that arrogant bastard being forced to apologize to dozens of people?" I said. "Isn't that just the most delicious news?"

"Yes, and I'm so pleased," Maggie said, "that I'm going to have another drink."

When it came, we clinked glasses and drank to Adriana, then to Norma. "I wish she'd lived to hear this," Maggie said. "Although at the end, she'd achieved such a high level of detachment from other people's lives, she probably wouldn't have enjoyed it nearly as much as we are."

"And he was her son," I said. "She might still have had some feeling for him."

"I wonder if Tanya will stick with him," Maggie said.

"I bet the blonde won't." That thought pleased me, too.

Duff and Joanna both put their glasses down and stared. "Maggie," I said, "tell them about the woman Trevor had with him when he came over to trash Norma's house."

By the time we were halfway through our burgers, the gloating over Trevor's well-deserved misfortunes and speculation about his personal life had given way to other topics. But, as we finished our coffees and prepared to leave, Duff said, "Did you know that an ostrich's eye is bigger than its brain?"

Joanna laughed. "Could that possibly be a metaphor for Trevor's arrogance and his brain?"

"I never said a word." Duff was grinning.

"I think I can match that," I said. "Did you know that a cat's sense of smell is about fourteen times stronger than ours?"

"No wonder Trevor never had any animals," Maggie said. "They wouldn't go near him."

"Hey, wait a minute," I said. "If Trevor loses his income and his house in Uplands, would he ask the Islands Trust for Norma's land back because he's destitute?"

In unison, Duff, Joanna, and Maggie said, "Holly, you worry too much!"



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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

About the Book

Change is afoot on Adriana Island. George the Magnificent, tabby-Siamese king of Holly Haven (and the star of *Cats in Clover* and *Siamese Summers*), is fighting to keep his realm from being taken over by Kaylie, the ambitious pure-blood Siamese queen. Holly, along with Adriana's other two trustees, is waging a legal battle to protect Norma Brentwood's precious land from her greedy son and the threat of development. Norma herself is struggling with serious illness. Ben is under siege by Father Time and Ben's mother, Maggie, is trying to reconcile a youthful mind with an aging body.

And what about Shazaam, the mysterious stray kitten living under the couch? Is she hatching nefarious plans?

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she writes full-time in the beautiful, temperate, and very wet Pacific Coast rainforest. Her books include humor (some about cats and some about the English language), mainstream, and science fiction.

